

**Between Policy Making and the Public Sphere: The Role of Rhetoric in  
Anglo-French Imperial Relations, 1940-1945**

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## **Abstract**

The long history of Anglo-French relations has often been acrimonious. After the German defeat of France in June 1940 the right to represent the French nation was contested by Philippe Pétain's Vichy government and Charles de Gaulle's London-based Free French resistance movement. This thesis will examine the highly complex relationship between Britain and these two competing sources of Frenchness between 1940 and 1945. It will do so through a series of empire-themed "crisis points," which contributed to a heightened state of Anglo-French tension affecting all three actors.

This study uses rhetoric as a means to link decision makers or statesman to the public sphere. It argues that policy makers, whether in the British War Cabinet, de Gaulle's headquarters at Carlton Gardens, or Pétain's ministries at Vichy anticipated how their policies were likely to be received by a group or groups of individuals. These were individuals who contributed towards what decision makers believed to be public opinion. Perceptions of public opinion, in other words, played a vital role in policy creation. In turn, the desire to get one or more sectors of the public "on board" with a particular policy or wartime operation gave rhetoric a place of primary importance.

Specifically, we will see how policy makers carefully constructed and revised public statements and speeches. When these external communications and explanations are placed side by side with internal official discussions, it will become evident that rhetoric is itself a vital strategic tool. The grammatical constructions and vocabulary that made up official statements and mass media responses shed light on broader wartime themes including victory and defeat, allies and enemies, power, sovereignty, neutrality and morality. Ultimately, acknowledging that rhetoric is an inherent part of policy making allows us to better understand the links between the governing bodies of a nation and those who have a stake in its policies. At the same time, it allows us to see how less tangible normative factors continue to impact this process.

*What is it that prevents me from being useful as a doctor or a writer? I think it is not so much our privations or our wanderings or our constantly changing and unsettled lives, as the power in our day of rhetoric, of the cliché - all this "dawn of the future", "building a new world", "torch-bearers of mankind". The first time you hear it you think: "What wealth of imagination!" But in fact the reason it is so pompous is that there is no imagination at the back of it, because the thought is second-rate.<sup>1</sup>*

*[They] will judge you by public opinion in your town, and this is shaped by the fools who by sheer chance were both noble rich and moderate. Woe betide you if you stand out from the herd!<sup>2</sup>*

*He talks a tremendous amount, with a strange, nervous volubility, in which you hear a dozen thoughts, ideas and memories muttering at once. Each thought remains uncompleted. He trails them behind him like so much torn paper, snagged on random words or images.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago* (London: Random House, 2002), 258.

<sup>2</sup> Stendhal, *The Red and the Black: A Chronicle of the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 156.

<sup>3</sup> Mihail Sebastian, *For Two Thousand Years*, trans. Philip Ó Ceallaigh (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 136.

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## Abbreviations

French Equatorial Africa	AEF
British Expeditionary Force	BEF
Combined Chiefs of Staff	CCS
French Committee of National Liberation	CFLN
Chief of the Imperial General Staff	CIGS
French National Committee	CNF
Conseil National de la Résistance	CNR
Commission d'Action Militaire	COMAC
Chiefs of Staff	COS
Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur	FFI
International Relations	IR
Joint Planning Staff	JPS
Joint Planning Subcommittee	JPSC
League of Nations	LON
Middle East Command	MEC
Middle East War Council	MEWC
Mass Observation	MO
Ministry of Information	MOI
French Christian Democrat Party	MRP
Office of Strategic Services	OSS
French Communist Party	PCF
Permanent Mandates Commission	PMC
Special Operations Executive	SOE
Vice Chiefs of Staff	VCS
Vice Chief of the Imperial General Staff	VCIGS

## Chapter 1: Introduction History and Rhetoric

### Introduction

The Second World War is often remembered as a period of rhetorical prowess. Churchill's speeches and legacy as a great orator (a legacy which conveniently leaves out his numerous failures) continues to be recalled by modern-day politicians who seek, through reputational entrepreneurship, to persuade both themselves and others of their own greatness.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Churchillian rhetoric that denigrated the practice of appeasement has been and continues to be employed to suggest that a particular foreign policy is weak and abhorrent.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is the rhetoric that stemmed from events: the preambles to "great" speeches, the stark radio addresses, and the voices that delivered them, that is most often remembered and enshrined (even if retrospectively) as a part of our national story. Employing rhetorical analysis from a historical perspective can offer new insights on the complex and often subtle ways in which language is employed to persuade, place blame or confirm, even, on occasion, to create a lasting national myth. It can shed light on cultural norms by examining how and why a particular event was described in the way it was. Most importantly, it can become the connective tissue between official policy making and the translation and discussion of those decisions within the public sphere.

Negative connotations of rhetoric, as compared to the search for an objective (and scientifically rigorous) truth, have encouraged modern definitions that describe it as "ostentatious or empty expression."<sup>3</sup> However, classical definitions, including that of Cicero, who described rhetoric as "speech designed to persuade" in his dialogue *De Oratore*, associate rhetoric with the art form of language that has a persuasive element.<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Burke's numerous books based on literary criticism through rhetoric insist that rhetoric is "rooted in the essential function of language itself,"<sup>5</sup> and he uses this argument to construct a

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Toye, "The Churchill Syndrome: Reputational Entrepreneurship and the Rhetoric of Foreign Policy since 1945," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 10 no. 3 (2008), 375.

<sup>2</sup> R. Gerald Hughes, *The Postwar Legacy of Appeasement, British Foreign Policy Since 1945* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 179.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Richards, *Rhetoric*, (London: Routledge, 2008), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 49.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

retorical analysis of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* that demonstrates how Hitler composed a singular worldview for his readers.<sup>6</sup>

This feature of rhetoric, as serving to influence, has been elaborated upon by contemporary scholars such as Alan G. Gross, who argues that contrary to criticism associating rhetoric with lies and manipulation, "...rhetoric is more than window-dressing; it concerns the necessary and sufficient conditions for the creation of persuasive discourse in *any* field."<sup>7</sup> Acknowledging that language - far from a neutral concept - is employed both consciously and subconsciously as a form of persuasion makes it invaluable as a window into the motivations and underlying perceptions of its users. Studies that fail to distinguish between rhetoric and propaganda fail to consider the difference between discussion and demands. Rhetoric is unique in that it seeks, within the public sphere and through the appearance of rational choice, to lead readers and listeners to arrive at particular conclusions *for themselves*. This is a central tenant of democratic rhetoric – creating an environment in which the public can or appears to have access to different interpretations of a single policy. Policy makers, who sought to justify potentially controversial events did so by *explaining* the reasons for such a policy through a calculated use of rational arguments, not by *demanding* that their readership adhere to their decisions. This approach rightly acknowledges the complex relationship between policy making and the reaction, or perceived reaction that policy arguments elicit within the public sphere(s). As will be seen throughout this thesis, the Vichy government employed a much more authoritarian approach to rhetoric, in which official publications and the mass media response became largely synonymous.

In the following chapters, I use rhetoric to examine this relationship between policy making and the public sphere within the context of Anglo-French imperial relations from late May 1940 through to the bitter colonial clashes between France and Britain over the future of the Levant mandates of Syria and Lebanon in 1945. Comparative in focus, this study analyses a series of "crisis points": the fall of France between the Dunkirk evacuations and the signing of the armistice in late June, the British bombardment of the French Fleet at Mers el-Kébir a fortnight later, Free French attempts to take Dakar in late September

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<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Burke, *On Symbols and Society*, (ed.) Joseph R. Gusfield (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Alan G. Gross, *The Rhetoric of Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), viii.



1940, Allied landings in North Africa during operation Torch in 1942, and the Anglo-Free French operations in Syria in 1941 and subsequently in 1943 and 1945.<sup>8</sup> These points have been chosen with the goal of looking at the progression and complexity of the development of the British, Free French, and Vichy relationships through an analysis of the rhetoric of all parties involved. The very public and contentious nature of imperial clashes at Mers el-Kébir, Dakar, North Africa and the Levant make them ideal case studies as each provoked strong reactions and clear efforts to either justify or condemn the policies pursued. In sum, the scope of the study, spanning 1940-1945, makes it possible to understand how the shifting context of empires at war and the changing fortunes of each side affected their policy and rhetoric.

Policy making is understood here as those discussions that took place as part of an internal government process of debating strategic alternatives. Central to this undertaking is the choice of options laid before ministers who had the goal of organising or explaining one of the above operations. In the United Kingdom, for example, policy discussions took place within the War Cabinet but policy makers extended beyond ministers to include those members of the Whitehall bureaucracy and the armed forces who contributed to the discussions and or brought professional opinions to the process with the goal of influencing the outcome. Importantly, policy makers not only consulted experts on the ground, they also weighed likely public responses to the policy choices under review and anticipated how each operation was likely to affect the standing of the government (and, often, of the minister concerned) in the eyes of key domestic and foreign interest groups. Pure material capabilities clearly played a significant role in determining whether the operation was actually feasible. However, the point is that even if manpower and weaponry were readily available, other intangible factors, such as a likely public backlash in response to unnecessary civilian deaths, still had real impacts on the final decision.

The focus of this study is not to attempt to redefine events, but rather to understand how this series of clashes was understood, discussed, and indeed, portrayed rhetorically from the inception of the policy making process, to its

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<sup>8</sup> The strong role that was played by the U.S., both before and after her entry into the war, in offering confirmation or criticism of Anglo-French actions will also contribute to this analysis.

publication in national papers and discussion (or lack of) on the streets. Between 1940-1945, the current state of the Anglo-French relationship was depicted using deliberate word choice, representations and structures. Understanding the complexity of the relationship through cultural, linguistic, and rhetorical lenses will bring a more nuanced viewpoint to this period and focus upon a vital consideration in wartime relations: the perception of events and their consequences, rather than simply the hard “facts” of the events themselves. The following pages will discuss how this argument will be grounded using various methodologies before examining how this study fits within and contributes to the already extensive range of Second World War research.

### **Definition of Terms:**

#### Rhetoric

What all of the aforementioned scholars do, and what this study will do as well, is to define rhetoric as a means of *representation* or *portrayal* of a particular event, focussing upon the persuasive nature of language usage. This approach is consistent with broader intellectual acknowledgement that language itself is inherently persuasive and subjective.<sup>9</sup> Rhetoric, resulting from the relationships between political actors, media, and other sources of opinion is deliberately employed to influence events (or their perception) in order to achieve a specific outcome. Thus, studying the underlying rhetorical framework of an event creates greater insight into how and why it was conceived, planned, carried out, and subsequently justified and remembered in a particular way. This rhetorical approach to history emphasises the crucial role that persuasion played in how historical events were processed and understood. Recent years have seen a substantial growth in studies that employ rhetorical approaches or attempt to ascertain why historical events are remembered in a particular way.<sup>10</sup> As a field of analysis, this approach offers many valuable opportunities for the inclusion of

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<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969). Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971). Jennifer Richards, *Rhetoric* (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). Jonathan Charteris-Black, *Politicians and Rhetoric: The Persuasive Power of Metaphor* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

interdisciplinary studies from areas of international relations such as foreign policy.

Richard Toye asserts “The purpose of rhetorical analysis is not to ‘unlock’ a set of words to reveal a meaning that is innate or set in stone but rather – in part – to identify the *social meaning* of particular statements or symbols in given contexts.”<sup>11</sup> Rhetorical analysis, in other words, is not simply about understanding what was said and how events were described, but how these descriptions were given meaning within their contemporary context. Efforts across other disciplines duplicate this call for a new understanding of rhetoric and the role it can play in our understanding of society, both past and present. Gross’s assertion that “...our social reality is uncontroversially the product of persuasion”<sup>12</sup> critiques studies that are grounded in truth-based analysis, just as de Man’s statement that “...the bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts...” highlights the very subjective nature that our source material often takes.<sup>13</sup> These arguments play a valuable role in facilitating both understanding and debate. In literary analysis words can take on meaning as a result of their social significance, their context, and who is employing them. This observation is also important for historians attempting to capture the significance of political speeches, the mass media, and indeed public reactions to both of these sources.<sup>14</sup> Given this approach to rhetoric, it is also crucial to define a second and linked set of concepts: that of “the public” and “public opinion.”

### The Public and Public Opinion

When looking at the relationship between the public and policy making it is important to define how this great mass, “the public,” and its “opinions” were actually understood. Murray Edelman has pointed out “There can be no one ‘public opinion’ but, rather, many publics. Some opinions change easily, while others persist indefinitely.”<sup>15</sup> In this context, one must consider a number of

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Toye, *Rhetoric: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 59.

<sup>12</sup> Gross, *The Rhetoric of Science*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 165.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (Los Altos, CA: Hermes Publications, 1959), 340.

<sup>15</sup> Murray Edelman, *Political Language: Words that Succeed and Policies that Fail* (New York: Academic Press, 1994), 50.

factors: the relative newness of polling organisations such as Gallup, the particular nature of foreign policy in a wartime context, and the beliefs of the policy making elite as to what constituted public opinion. In this sense, the historical context is paramount. Issues such as self-reporting, response bias, and perception must all be considered in this definition. Specifically, individuals may be motivated to modify their own reports due to the perceived necessity of conforming to social norms, such as not reporting fear of defeat in case of being stigmatised as disloyal. Similarly, individuals may perceive the same event differently, evaluating it through different life experiences.

Following the post-modernist “crisis” in the 1980s, historical studies have debunked myths that readily equated British public opinion with the “Dunkirk Spirit” mentality. Consensus-based myths like this are misleading, not least because they lump all of the war years together instead of recognising shifts in both behaviour and popular opinion throughout 1939-1945.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, regional studies point to a less homogenous reaction to the war across Britain. David Thoms, for example, argues that there was a general failure by the Home Office to establish criteria to define and measure morale. Far from, the “spirit of the blitz,” raids on Plymouth between November 1940 and April 1941 “appear to have brought the city close to the breaking point.”<sup>17</sup> Work on the French side, particularly that portraying the Vichy/occupation years has largely been linked with ideas of collaboration when discussing opinions and attitudes to the regime. Indeed, Robert Paxton’s *Vichy France Old Guard New Order*, although rightfully still a seminal force in the field, has been followed by studies that seek to uncover the nuances of lives and ideology in both Vichy and occupied France.<sup>18</sup> In particular, French scholar Pierre Laborie has argued that a lack of

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<sup>16</sup> David Reynolds, Warren F. Kimball and A.O. Chubarian, eds., *Allies at War: The Soviet, American, and British Experience, 1949-1945* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 250. See also, for issues of misreporting due to feelings of guilt: M.A. Doherty, *Nazi Wireless Propaganda: Lord Haw-Haw and British Public Opinion in the Second World War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2000), 119-120.

<sup>17</sup> David Thoms, “The Blitz, Civilian Morale and Regionalism, 1940-1942,” in *War Culture: Social Change and Changing Experience in World War Two*, eds. Pat Kirkham and David Thoms (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995), 4, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order 1940-1944* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972). Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Penguin, 2005). Francine Muel-Dreyfus, *Vichy and the Eternal Feminine: A Contribution to a Political Sociology of Gender*, trans. Kathleen A Johnson (London: Duke University Press, 2001).

stability in the interwar years resulted in a confused and highly polarised ideological climate that was firmly entrenched by the late 1930s.<sup>19</sup> The overall result has been to broaden the historiography of French wartime experience by placing the French story within a wider European context and taking a second look at the responses within French society under occupation.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond the historical field, the research of political scientists such as Ralph Negrine strengthens our understanding of public opinion as a measurable concept. Studies of the public and public opinion can be improved by taking a dynamic approach, utilising theoretical concepts based on the idea of social constructs and the tendency of individuals to interpret issues in a way that “draws on past, personal, and other experiences.”<sup>21</sup> These approaches transcend simplifications of public opinion as a product of either mass media and official communiqués or ingrained sentiments. They argue that the public and its opinions might be influenced by rhetoric, but that the creation of rhetoric is also influenced by what its writers *think* will appeal to their target audience. Laborie succinctly argues: “Collective feeling is always expressed according to a scale of interests and a certain order of priorities...these being unstable hierarchies that are created from what individuals perceive or think they perceive, of reality at a given moment.”<sup>22</sup> In short, not every item of news is considered to be as important as the next.

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<sup>19</sup> Pierre Laborie, *L'Opinion Française Sous Vichy* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1990), 328. See also Philip Nord, *France's New Deal : From the Thirties to the Postwar Era* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2010) for administrative continuity between the interwar and postwar years.

<sup>20</sup> Yves Durand, “Collaboration French-Style: A European Perspective,” in *France at War: Vichy and the Historians*, eds. Sarah Fishman, Ioannis Sinanoglou, and Laura L. Downs (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 63. John Hellman, “Communitarians, Non-Conformists, and the Search for a ‘New Man’ in Vichy France,” in *France at War: Vichy and the Historians*, eds. Sarah Fishman, Ioannis Sinanoglou, and Laura L. Downs (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 94. For a social history of Paris under occupation see: Ronald Rosbottom, *When Paris Went Dark: The City of Light Under German Occupation, 1940-44* (London: John Murray, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Ralph Negrine, *The Communication of Politics* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 128. See also: G. Lang and K. Lang, *The Battle for Public Opinion: The President, the Press, and the Polls during Watergate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). R. Neuman, M. Just and A. Crigler, *Common Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> Pierre Laborie, “1940 -1944: Double Think in France,” in *France at War: Vichy and the Historians*, eds. Sarah Fishman, Ioannis Sinanoglou, and Laura L. Downs (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 183.

Rhetorical descriptions of events that impacted the Anglo-French wartime relationship illustrate this process, whereby policies are meticulously framed in light of policy makers' beliefs about the current state of public opinion. British policy makers in particular continued to place a huge emphasis on the ability of the press to reflect public opinion despite the availability of new polling techniques that might have suggested otherwise.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps, though, they were right. Attempts by organisations such as Mass Observation (MO), whose work was carried out under the auspices of the Ministry of Information (MOI), represented only a part of society, with MO diarists being largely "middle class, well read and articulate" as well as left-of-centre politically.<sup>24</sup> War Cabinet minutes included speculations about the likelihood of support for a policy, diplomatic correspondence in its aftermath, and analyses of metropolitan and foreign newspapers by the French<sup>25</sup> and the British Ministry of Information.<sup>26</sup> Prior to the defeat, Daladier's *Commissariat Général à L'Information* (led by Jean Giraudoux) and Reynaud's *Ministère de l'Information* played a primary role in formulating propaganda and issuing press publications on the Anglo-French position in the war. Throughout the conflict, both the United Kingdom and metropolitan France also engaged in frequent press analyses of both their own and the other's press. Within Britain, analyses of the local press were included in MOI Home Intelligence Reports and foreign press commentary was routed through local officials to the Foreign Office. The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs received reports on British media content from their overseas legations including Portugal and Ireland.

Leslie Hore-Belisha, National Liberal MP and Secretary of State for War under Neville Chamberlain until 1940, was to ask the British Parliament for assurance "that Parliament and the free press would be fully maintained, so that the Government should not be cut off from their stimulating power... It is a question of the freedom of public opinion to express itself, to watch and to influence the Administration, and to play its indispensable part in winning the

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<sup>23</sup> Daniel Hucker, *Public Opinion and the End of Appeasement in Britain and France* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2011), 20.

<sup>24</sup> Sandra Koa Wing, ed., *Mass Observation: Britain in the Second World War*, (London: The Folio Society, 2007), xiv.

<sup>25</sup> The bulk of French analyses of the foreign press can be found at the MAE in 10GMII, Sub-Series Z and 9GMII, Sub-Series Y.

<sup>26</sup> Assuming that press reports were an accurate mirror of popular opinion.

war.”<sup>27</sup> Hore-Belisha articulated his understanding of the relationship between the press, policy makers and the public. Oversimplified and grandiose, his depiction is valuable nevertheless. Within this context of multiple publics with multiple opinions, it is crucial to look at the *perception* that policy makers had of public opinion and how these *perceptions* (with all of their possible biases and oversimplifications) influenced policy.<sup>28</sup> The argument proposed in this thesis points to the need to disaggregate what politicians understood likely public reactions to be from any supposedly objective or monolithic idea of a singular “public opinion.” Indeed, as the following section will demonstrate, studies in both the historical as well as other theory-based disciplines can offer valuable perspectives on the relationship between policy making and government perceptions of public opinion, largely read through mass media. I argue that rhetorical analysis provides a crucial link between these two constituencies: government members and the publics they represented.

### **Synthesising Public Opinion, The Media and Foreign Policy**

Significant historical work has been undertaken in an effort to understand the relationship between public opinion, the media and foreign policy making.<sup>29</sup> However, what is notable within the current historiography is the persistent failure to engage with literary criticism and the social sciences, a fact noted by Melvin Small in his criticism of historians who have ignored the work on public opinion taking place in other disciplines. This failure, he asserts, has resulted in work that is “intellectually barren.”<sup>30</sup> Bernard Cohen, a scholar of international relations, levels a similar charge at historians, arguing that they have failed to prove any kind of causal relationship between public opinion, the press and policy making, relying instead on tired assumptions and the perceived influence

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<sup>27</sup> “The Voice of Public Opinion,” *The Manchester Guardian*, June 26, 1940, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Hucker, *Public Opinion*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Melvin Small, “Historians Look at Public Opinion,” in *Public Opinion and Historians: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Melvin Small (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970). Bernard C. Cohen, “The Relationship between Public Opinion and Foreign Policy Maker,” in *Public Opinion and Historians: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Melvin Small (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970). Stuart N. Soroka, “Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy,” *The Harvard International Journal of Press and Politics*, 8, (2003): 27-48.

<sup>30</sup> Small, “Historians Look at Public Opinion,” 13.

of the above groups on decision makers.<sup>31</sup> Cohen's previous studies have sought to identify levels of interest and readership in foreign policy press reports in order to understand the role of news, not just as a fuel for intellectual debate or intelligence provision, but also as a social and psychological function. He argues that the press "...may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about."<sup>32</sup> Still, the field remains split between the theoretically rigorous work in International Relations (IR) and the largely empirical work in the historical field. Historians have generally been encouraged to avoid sweeping generalisations such as Cohen's. Equally, however, it seems reasonable to conclude that theoretical methodologies, when combined with historical archival-based analyses, open wider perspectives than solely empirical approaches.

Efforts to prove the link between policy making and public opinion through a causal framework have increasingly emphasised (in both history and IR) the unique and varying nature of this relationship. Stuart Soroka argues that media coverage plays a key role in determining levels of salience, or interest, in foreign affairs, and that previous studies have failed to distinguish between the perceived importance of different issues.<sup>33</sup> He has built on earlier work by Bryan Jones, which argues "that democratic governments are more responsive to changes in *attentiveness* (my italics) to problems than they are to the particular distribution of opinion on a problem."<sup>34</sup> In-depth analysis of policy making documents such as memoranda and War Cabinet minutes as well as edited texts of broadcasts and press reports offer useful clues as to what factors played key or facilitating roles in the decisions to go ahead with a particular policy. Reading the archive in this way also illuminates how these factors shifted from case to case within unique contexts. In addition, intelligence summaries and political correspondence from the Foreign Office files offer useful observations on perceptions of metropolitan and foreign reactions to

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<sup>31</sup> Cohen, "The Relationship between Public Opinion and Foreign Policy Maker," 67.

<sup>32</sup> Bernard Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 29.

<sup>33</sup> Soroka, "Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy," 29.

<sup>34</sup> Bryan D. Jones, *Reconceiving Decision-Making in Democratic Politics: Attention, Choice, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 125.



particular high-profile events. Indeed, one of the values of historical studies lies in their contextual specificity.<sup>35</sup>

Clearly, consensus about the relationship between policy making and the public is far from being realised. This study aims to show a potential way ahead. Specifically, although largely empirical in approach, it also brings in additional theoretical concepts. In this study, the language used to portray the Anglo-French imperial relationship, as it shifted from alliance to animosity, offers insight into the causes and consequences of Franco-British colonial confrontation. Broad rhetorical themes, such as the emphasis upon the inevitability of a British victory and the rehabilitation of partnership between Britain and a restored French democracy illustrate commonalities in wartime justifications for violent actions. The unique language and the particular emphasis placed within political speeches and press reports can illustrate deeper tendencies, such as how the Anglo-French relationship was portrayed, where blame was laid for the success or failure of a policy, and the part played by rhetorical constructions in influencing their overall persuasiveness. The bottom line being that such observations contribute new perspectives on the ways in which policy is created: not simply from the top down, but from the bottom up as well.

Foreign policy experts argue that theoretical approaches that “black box” the state by assuming that whatever group of individuals is making policy can be considered as a unitary rational actor are simply not realistic.<sup>36</sup> In this vein, cognitive and constructivist theories, which consider both the individual and unique influences within thought processes as well as the subjective lenses through which decision makers view situations and relationships provide a basis for comparative historical studies. These theories rightly emphasise the need to consider how policy options are perceived according to a number of highly variable, and often culturally-influenced, constructs. This approach can deepen our understanding of the contributory factors to the making of policy by shedding light not just on *how*, but on *why* a policy was construed through

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<sup>35</sup> Alfred H. Kelly, “Response to Cohen,” in *Public Opinion and Historians: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Melvin Small (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), 88.

<sup>36</sup> Valerie M. Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis, Classic and Contemporary Theory* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2007), 4.

particular rhetorical choices.<sup>37</sup> Methodologies such as these acknowledge the inherent complexity of the perceived social framework within which individuals respond to, understand or construct various events. So, just as British media sources utilised imagery of Napoleon to appeal to a common sense of pride and inevitable victory, so the French successfully employed Joan of Arc as a recognised symbol of a great nation, persevering through a testing period of foreign occupation. Wartime rhetoric in particular is an especially rich field of analysis, as times of upheaval often result in the rise of heroic myths or overt constructions of national greatness with the specific aim of motivating a population.<sup>38</sup> Understanding the attitudes and perceptions of policy makers during this period, and the multitude of both personal and public factors that contributed to this viewpoint is crucial. These underlying factors increase understanding of the relationship between policy makers and their perceived public and how rhetoric was used in the interpretation and negotiation of this relationship.

## Methodology

The methodology employed in this study emphasises the role that rhetorical analysis can play in deciphering how and why various policies affecting the Anglo-French imperial relationship were portrayed in the way they were. As mentioned above, this study will combine the empirical analysis of archival, media and mass observation material with recognition of the obvious value that interdisciplinary and especially theoretical material from fields such as IR and sociolinguistics can provide. Theoretical approaches add another analytical dimension that helps clarify the singular importance of rhetoric. For all that, the grounding of this research in extensive archival material makes it a valuable contribution to the field of history. As discussed, this study will look at a series of “crisis points” between 1940 and 1945 that in some way profoundly affected or reconfigured the Anglo-French imperial relationship. This scope of events

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<sup>37</sup> Neuman, *Common Knowledge*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> Charteris-Black, *Politicians and Rhetoric*, 57. For more studies on historical memory and myth see: Hughes, *The Postwar Legacy of Appeasement*. Robert Gildea, *The Past in French History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). J.M. Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Anthony Brundage and Richard A. Cosgrove, *British Historians and National Identity* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2014).

represents well the shifting nature of Franco-British imperial relations during the war years while maintaining a relatively consistent geopolitical perspective: the focus is on high-profile colonial clashes throughout. As a result, the chapters to come range from early British concerns surrounding French imperial possessions as exemplified by the violence of Mers el-Kébir, through to the immediate post war, in which colonial issues again played a crucial role in Anglo-French relations, this time in the context of imminent decolonisation from the Middle East. Another advantage of ranging across the years 1940 to 1945 is to highlight the steady growth of American influence on European colonial affairs and the consequent French and British reactions to Rooseveltian anti-imperialist rhetoric. The following subsections elaborate further on the source material that is being used and the empirical and theoretical approaches being applied.

### Sources

Sources for this study have been principally drawn from British and French governmental archives. On the British side, policy making documents including War Cabinet minutes and memoranda, Foreign Office and Service Ministry correspondence between departments and ministers and Political Warfare Executive reports tracing the outcomes of events and operations have all been consulted. These sources are used to gauge the factors (including public opinion), which influenced the construction of policy. Personal papers of political actors as well as memoirs and diaries provide similar insight into individual decision-making processes and beliefs as well as the relationships and views held by various decision-makers. Draft press releases, created as a part of the policy making process, as well as radio addresses and parliamentary speeches serve as a link between policy making processes internal to government and the mass media output and public sphere interpretation of the resultant policy actions.

French archival sources have been consulted in a similar pattern where possible. The personal correspondence of leading political figures will help to construct a fuller picture of individual beliefs as well as the decisive interactions between figures within the policy making process. Likewise, French archives contain extensive records analysing various foreign media sources. A significant portion of French sources have been drawn from the documents at

the *Ministère des Affaires Étrangères*, which contains reports, press releases and records of governmental and public reactions to critical events such as the clashes at Mers el-Kébir and Dakar. Also crucial are the press analyses of British newspapers following the collapse of France and the diplomatic crises between the two countries. This mirroring of sources between Britain and France is a crucial part of the methodology, in that it tests rhetorical constructions as part of typical and well-developed infrastructure within the administrative and government frameworks of the two imperial powers. A word of caution here: Free France may have been closer in practice to an exile movement, based first in London and then in the French empire. However, it regularly attempted to assert representative legitimacy by claiming that Vichy was both illegal and inadmissible as a government. Vichy, of course, attempted to do much the same in its efforts to delegitimize the 'Gaullist' movement as traitorous and unrepresentative.

Sources that attempted to measure or gauge public opinion in response to a specific event or in regards to general wartime sentiment can lead to a more nuanced view of the variability of public opinion within both Britain and France. Thus, it is possible to dispel oversimplifications about wartime sentiment as Doherty did by pointing out that in wartime Britain, "at times, spirits...were very low, class antagonism was very sharp, the government was deeply unpopular and Jews were widely disliked."<sup>39</sup> In Britain, Home Intelligence reports are particularly valuable, as they commented directly on public attitudes to the press and other information sources. They also noted regional variations in sentiment due to sustained bombing raids or other contextual features. MO materials, particularly observational diaries that attempted to provide broad estimations of public opinion, remain a helpful, if sometimes class-specific source from which to find out how reactions to events varied. While less material exists in regard to attempts to measure public opinion in Vichy and occupied France, there is some political correspondence in which government discussions analysed perceived opinion in France. Prefects' reports commented upon *département*-level opinion in occupied France and were systematically collated by the Interior Ministry. In this particular study, post-defeat analyses will be focused on sources internal to Vichy's governmental bureaucracy or those that shed light on opinion within Vichy.

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<sup>39</sup> Doherty, *Nazi Wireless Propaganda*, 187.

On the British side, the primary media sources for this project are press reports from *The Manchester Guardian* (hereafter *The Guardian*), the Sunday paper, *The Observer* and *The Times*. These papers were national publications with a wide readership and longstanding reputations for full and fair news coverage. *The Guardian* epitomised C.P. Scott's liberal beliefs that a paper should encourage public discussion and dialogue.<sup>40</sup> Churchill himself made it a point to read *The Guardian*, a fact of which its editor William Crozier was well aware. *The Times*, on the other hand, most closely maintained the government line and additionally was referenced in intelligence summaries as a source of press opinion. That being said, it was neither controlled by government nor beholden to it and, like *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, it offers valuable perspective on the ways in which high-profile events were represented. Both the wide circulation and availability of these papers and their reputation as "serious" news sources within the broadsheet market make them ideal to observe the development of foreign policy rhetoric. Most importantly, for many within the policy making establishment, they were looked to as a reliable source of public sentiment in Britain. Radio addresses, including news reports and political speeches, which were broadcast through the BBC, will also be considered. Archival research based upon Home Intelligence reports indicated at times both a distrust of, and a frustration with radio broadcasts for their relative lack of substantial information in comparison to broadsheet press reports.<sup>41</sup> However, this observation can be tied to two useful conclusions. First, analyses of official speeches made via radio can show how leaders attempted to foster credibility with their listeners through more succinct, simple messages. Second, the reliance of the public on press sources for deeper analysis demonstrates the two-way process between rhetoric and opinion formation. The most politically literate sections of the public actively chose to read, consider and sometimes critique different sources of news, a fact that decision makers were well aware of and responsive to.

The French press represents more challenges, particularly in light of the disruption to newspaper publication both during and after the occupation. Vichy took over the Havas press agency in November 1940, subsequently renaming it

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<sup>40</sup> Mark Hampton, "The Press, Patriotism, and Public Discussion: C.P. Scott, the "Manchester Guardian", and the Boer War, 1899-1902," *The Historical Journal* 44, no. 1 (2001): 187.

<sup>41</sup> Doherty, *Nazi Wireless Propaganda*, 120.

the French Information Office, and used it to issue instructions or guidance on publications.<sup>42</sup> Left wing papers *Ce Soir* and *Regards* were not available after the prohibition of the Communist press in 1939, although *Ce Soir* was re-established in 1944. Leading sources of international and diplomatic news including *Le Temps* and *Le Figaro* both stopped publishing following the German occupation of the southern zone in 1942. Papers that continued to publish through 1944, *L'Action Française*, *Le Matin*, *Paris Soir*, and *Le Petit Parisien*, were shut down after being branded as collaborationist. Additionally, following the French defeat in June 1940, the variety of print sources available was split between the occupied zone (northern and Atlantic coastal France) and unoccupied Vichy France. This study will focus upon papers that continued to publish as part of the new *État Français*. Of these, *Le Temps* will be the main source of analysis. Created in 1861, this newspaper gained a reputation as a well-informed and sometimes privileged source of global and international news.<sup>43</sup> Given the colonial nature of many of the crisis points as well as the strong symbolic role played by the colonies following the defeat, it will also be useful to look at some of the colonial press responses. The colonial publication, *L'Echo d'Alger* (1830-1962) will provide this alternative, “from the empire” perspective. Its availability as the principal French-language daily paper in Algeria until 1944 also makes it one of the only non-collaborationist press sources that continued to publish after the 1942 occupation. Although a settler mouthpiece and staunchly Vichy in tone, this paper did not have the overtly collaborationist or racist views that were common in far-right publications.

### Analysis: Empirical and Theoretical

Empirical analysis can highlight recurring themes within newspaper articles and press releases, such as the British insistence that Pétain’s government represented neither a legitimate entity nor the will of the citizenry. The “true” France, rather, was said to be made up of the bulk of the “ordinary” French population and rallied to de Gaulle’s Free French. This stance, so it was hoped, would allow the Anglo-French alliance to continue metaphorically in the hearts and minds of the respective populations. Equally, policy making documents

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<sup>42</sup> Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years 1940-1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 253.

<sup>43</sup> *Gallica*, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/html/presse-et-revues/les-principaux-quotidiens>.

provide important clues about the perceptions and motivations that underlay this process of rhetorical reinforcement. Placed within a particular context, rhetoric offers insights into how and why events were framed, or indeed not framed, in a particular way. Motivating factors might include social and cultural norms, individual cognitive constructs, and the political frameworks of bureaucracy, party politics and the like in which policy choices were made.<sup>44</sup> In addition to empirical analyses, the addition of theoretical perspectives can provide broadly applicable frameworks of understanding and can lead to stronger comparative studies and insights into patterns of decision making.

We have already seen how perspectives from IR might enrich empirical approaches. Sociolinguistic studies likewise offer additional insights. Cognitive linguists focus upon identifying links between metaphors as they exist in spoken language and our individual thought processes.<sup>45</sup> In other words, the way we think about and discuss events involves the use of widely accepted conceptual metaphors about what something is like and what it feels like to experience. Consider the metaphor “war is a journey.” This assumption impacts how war is discussed, including, for example, assumptions that it is likely to be long, that there may be bumps in the road, and that it will require sacrifice. Jonathan Charteris-Black’s detailed analysis of the metaphorical and other grammatical content of Churchill’s wartime speeches argues convincingly that Churchill’s “primary rhetorical objective” was to create a “heroic myth” that broadly represented the allies as moral and good and Hitler as evil and depraved.<sup>46</sup> By defining an event as a “crisis,” politicians are able to make credible implications about how the public should behave.<sup>47</sup> A crisis implies the need for people to put aside differences and face the event as a united and equal front. The myth of social equality during wartime belies these assumptions, lending credence to Edelman’s argument that “the language in which each crisis is discussed is selective in what it highlights and what it masks.”<sup>48</sup> As these examples indicate, incorporating theory into historical analysis can shed more light not just on what

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<sup>44</sup> George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 385.

<sup>45</sup> Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. and Gerard J. Steen, “Introduction,” in *Metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics*, eds. Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. and Gerard J. Steen (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1997), 1.

<sup>46</sup> Charteris-Black, *Politicians and Rhetoric*, 34.

<sup>47</sup> Edelman, *Political Language*, Chapter 3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

was said, but why these constructs were deemed effective, and how they were subsequently framed within the press and discussed within the broader public. In this sense, this study will pinpoint how decision makers employed broad themes often based upon moral arguments to give their justifications increased legitimacy.

Grammatical constructs similarly contribute to the basic structure of an argument. Ideological structures made up of “social conventions, norms [and] histories” shape the ways in which an individual talks about a particular topic or event.<sup>49</sup> This approach is consistent with efforts to understand the social function of rhetoric and its role here in understanding how both the self and a foreign other are portrayed within a wartime context. The core features of cognitive linguistics, which argue that language has a social and learned element rather than either residing autonomously in your head or being reduced to an objective, “truth conditional” way of describing events or surroundings, mesh well with the previously-discussed dimensions of rhetoric as a persuasive and subjective force. Specifically, policy discussions which included observations of public opinion, draft press reports that tone down or rephrase statements in order to present a more rosy view of Anglo-French relations, and general arguments or emphases within press stories provide a strong basis for understanding which specific perceptions played a role in policy formation (or, conversely, were left out) and how they were addressed rhetorically. The creation and dissemination of foreign policy, as seen through policy papers, speeches, and the mass media, utilise constructions based upon this social and symbolic nature of language. Individuals and policy makers create and negotiate meaning and articulate their understanding of policies through the mobilisation of cognitive processes, for example, by recalling a past experience in order to understand a present one. The discourses that grow up around policies are negotiated through understandings of social and cultural norms that have been constructed, confirmed, or renegotiated through the use of language, which includes grammatical structure, vocabulary, and broad ideas or arguments such as moral concepts. Ultimately, how, if at all, was the language of policy makers adapted to emphasise and garner a broader level of non-partisan support? How did grammatical choice in addition to broader imagery

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<sup>49</sup> Normon Fairclough, “Language and Ideology,” *English Language Research Journal* 3, (1989): 10.



serve to place or remove blame, to imply a sense of inevitable victory or renewed growth in the pattern of a great historical tradition? These are some of the questions that the following chapters will seek to clarify.

## **Historiography and Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, one of the most important questions that any new piece of research must answer is where it fits within and what it contributes to its particular field of study. First, it is useful to consider the main themes that this work addresses. On the broadest level, it examines the period of the Second World War. However, within this category it also addresses a number of key issues and questions: Anglo-French relations, Anglo-French imperial confrontations, decolonisation, and myth and memory. Analysis will be carried out using a variety of perspectives and viewpoints: public opinion, foreign policy, the role of the media and the nature of wartime diplomatic relations. Most importantly, analysis will be conducted through rhetoric. There are countless ways in which the Second World War has been studied, many of them offering valuable insights and perspectives into this complex battleground. It is certainly fair to say that each of these subject areas and each of these approaches occupy a part of the present historiography. However, what is lacking, and what makes this work original, is a synthesis of these areas. Rhetoric, as a primary tool of analysis, demonstrates the interconnectedness and indeed the interdependencies between policy making, public opinion and the mass media. It drives home the conclusion that rhetoric matters. What follows here is an overarching view of the academic approaches towards this topic. Due to the volume and detail of work that has been produced, a more nuanced historiographical analysis of each imperial crisis point to be studied will be incorporated within the appropriate chapter.

Starting from the bottom up, memoirs, diaries and volumes of speeches must be considered a valuable source of information. Where available, official histories like Llewellyn Woodward's *British Foreign Policy in the Second World* provide a comprehensive description of events and the policies behind them. However, their tendency to mask controversy and act as a justification of policy means they must be treated with care.<sup>50</sup> Issues of subjectivity aside, memoirs

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<sup>50</sup> In particular, the simplification of British policy with regard to the Levant states masks increasing and very much related concerns over policy in

can provide clues into the minds of decision makers – what clashes rankled the most, for example, just as omissions and discrepancies give an idea of what these individuals wanted to hide. Winston Churchill, Paul Reynaud, Charles de Gaulle, Duff Cooper, Paul Baudouin, Alexander Cadogan and Edward Spears all left behind extensive writings, which this study exploits.<sup>51</sup> Edward Spears' journey from champion to denigrator of the Free French is particularly well documented through a combination of his own writing (*Assignment to Catastrophe* and *Fulfilment of a Mission*) and that of his biographer, Max Egremont.<sup>52</sup> Marshal Pétain's biography by Richard Griffiths provides useful background and insights into the life of a man who took 12 years to advance to the rank of captain.<sup>53</sup> The depictions of Pétain's background and prejudices can aid researchers who want to better understand how these issues may have influenced his decision-making process. Paul Addison has written a voluminous study that traces the varying sources of Churchill's policies and convictions, including his belief that the British electorate was largely conservative.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, comparative studies such as François Kersaudy's excellent analysis of Churchill and de Gaulle demonstrate particularly well how both individuals used moral and emotive arguments to attempt to influence the actions of the other.<sup>55</sup>

The scope of this study and the complexity of the relationships that it addresses remain focused on two core issues: Anglo-French relations and

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Palestine. See Llewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1962), esp. chapter 13.

<sup>51</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, 6 Vol (London: Cassell & Co. Ltd, 1949). Paul Reynaud, *In the Thick of the Fight 1930-1945*, trans. James D. Lambert (London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1955). Paul Baudouin, *The Private Diaries of Paul Baudouin*, trans. Sir Charles Petrie (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1948). Duff Cooper, *Old Men Forget* (Bungay, Suffolk: Richard Clay and Company Ltd., 1954). Charles de Gaulle, *The Complete War Memoirs of Charles de Gaulle*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1998). Alexander Cadogan, *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938-1945*, ed. David Dilks (London: Cassell, 1971).

<sup>52</sup> Edward Spears, *Assignment to Catastrophe* (London: Heinemann, 1954). Edward Spears, *Fulfilment of a Mission* (London: Leo Cooper, 1977). Max Egremont, *Under Two Flags, The Life of Major General Sir Edward Spears* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997).

<sup>53</sup> Richard Griffiths, *Marshal Pétain* (London: Constable, 1970), xxii.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front 1900-1955* (London: Pimlico, 1993), 439. Also chapters 10-11.

<sup>55</sup> François Kersaudy, *Churchill and De Gaulle* (London, Fontana Press, 1990), 226.

empire. The former will also include individual studies of the French or British wartime experience, as they can provide useful bases for comparative perspectives. These themes, however, are not mutually exclusive and have been approached in a wide variety of ways. For clarity's sake, it is worth examining some of the core literature in each area in order to see how this new study and analytical approach can strengthen and even link these perspectives.

### Anglo-French Relations

Current works have discussed, debated and scrutinised British, Gaullist and Vichy actions. The work of well-known scholars like PMH Bell and Robert Tombs has spanned the long history of connection between Britain and France and provides useful overviews of the often-acrimonious relationship.<sup>56</sup> Today, the sheer volume of the current body of work is a testament to the continuing fascination with this topic. My study's contribution lies in the fact that, by employing a rhetorical approach, it becomes possible to see interconnections that were previously unclear. Anglo-French relations were never confined to either a diplomatic, political or popular level – all were connected. By studying how policy makers attempted to influence and subsequently monitor perceptions of Anglo-French relations these linkages become evident, if more complex. Too often scholars tend to take for granted or oversimplify the sentiments and thus the decision-making process of one party or the other. Desmond Dinan's book, *The Politics of Persuasion*, certainly makes it clear that British foreign policy was highly complex. It included countless plans for operations that were never carried out. However, this work unpacks the idea of persuasion from the specific perspective of foreign policy. Dinan is primarily concerned with understanding how the British policy-making establishment was able to or failed to persuade actors such as the United States or General Weygand to join the fight against the Axis powers.<sup>57</sup> In contrast, my own study is an in-depth and detailed analysis, not of politics between states, or the

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<sup>56</sup> Robert and Isabelle Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy: The French and the British from the Sun King to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007). PMH Bell, *A Certain Eventuality: Britain and the Fall of France* (London: Saxon House, 1974). PMH Bell, *France and Britain, 1900-1940: Entente and Estrangement* (London: Routledge, 1996). PMH Bell, *France and Britain, 1940-1994: The Long Separation* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>57</sup> Desmond Dinan, *The Politics of Persuasion: British Policy and French African Neutrality, 1940-42* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988).

political institutions of states, but rather the linkages that exist between political institutions and the press and public who respond to and indeed have a role in shaping official policy.

Particularly in the last two decades, responses to postmodern challenges of “conventional,” or positivistic approaches towards the study of history have resulted in an influx of literature that employs new approaches toward new subjects. In particular, the replacement of traditional, narrative-driven methods has resulted in analytically rich perspectives focused upon gendered or minority experiences during wartime. Hannah Diamond’s work on women’s experiences in France, for example, adds further depth to traditional approaches that tend to focus upon men in positions of power.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, the steady rise in publications dealing with historical myths and memory formation offer scholars many opportunities to challenge accepted assumptions about wartime behaviours and contexts. Two relatively early works that attempted to challenge British wartime “myths” were Agnus Calder’s *The Myth of the Blitz* and Tony Kushner’s *The Persistence of Prejudice*. Although Calder’s revisionist account has received some criticism for going too far in attempting to subvert the idea of British wartime unity, it is a useful platform because it leads the reader to question how wartime memories are often oversimplified and perpetuated.<sup>59</sup> Likewise, Kushner rightly points out that memories of wartime unity should not overshadow the fact that anti-Semitism and anti-Semitic stereotypes remained topical throughout the conflict.<sup>60</sup> More recently, Sonya Rose has examined how characterisations of Britain as a single community were mobilised in spite of, and indeed, in recognition, of class differences.<sup>61</sup> National identity is not a static concept. Examining the power of ideas of “oneness” and community during a war adds depth to studies on national identity and nationhood.<sup>62</sup>

Of particular value to this study has been the publication of research by Martin Alexander, Tony Judt and Samuel Hynes (to name only a few) that

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<sup>58</sup> Hannah Diamond, *Women and the Second World War in France: 1939-1948, Choices and Constraints* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1999).

<sup>59</sup> Agnus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico, 1991).

<sup>60</sup> Tony Kushner, *The Persistence of Prejudice: Anti-Semitism in British Society during the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).

<sup>61</sup> Sonya O. Rose, *Which People’s War? National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7-8.

<sup>62</sup> See e.g. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983) for his influential work on the nation as an imagined community.

examines links between historic portrayals of conflict with contemporary memories and perceptions of the incidents themselves.<sup>63</sup> Richard Toye and David Reynolds<sup>64</sup> have also approached questions of collective memory in their work on Churchill's rhetoric and writing. Toye's in-depth analysis of Churchill's wartime speeches argues convincingly that his addresses were far more than heroic orations; rather, they were "calculated political interventions which had diplomatic repercussions far beyond the effect on the morale of listeners in Britain."<sup>65</sup> Studies such as these result in a greater understanding of historic contexts because they challenge preconceived notions about how individuals or groups responded to complex events. In a similar way, since the publication of Robert Paxton's ground breaking work on Vichy France, first published between the late 1960s and early 1970s,<sup>66</sup> the study of the Vichy state has become much more nuanced. Sarah Fishman's article on the 1970s revisionist period spurns interpretations of Vichy as a small, unpopular regime that had been forced upon the French. In doing so it highlights this historiographical transition particularly well.<sup>67</sup> Paxton's work was decisive in shifting away from interpretations of Vichy as a "pause" in French history. However, more recent scholars like Philip Nord, Kevin Passmore, and Julian Jackson have been critical in revealing the continuities from the interwar decades of the late Third Republic, through the Vichy years and into the post-war era. By identifying how

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<sup>63</sup> Tony Judt, "From the House of the Dead: An Essay on Modern European Memory," in *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005). Samuel Hynes, "Personal Narratives and Commemoration," in *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It! Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Harlow, England: Pearson, 2004). Robert Tombs and Emile Chabal, eds., *Britain and France in Two World Wars: Truth, Myth and Memory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), esp. chapters 4 and 9.

<sup>64</sup> David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London: Allen Lane, 2004).

<sup>65</sup> Richard Toye, *The Roar of the Lion: The Untold Story of Churchill's World War II Speeches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>66</sup> Robert O. Paxton, *Parades and Politics at Vichy: The French Officer Corps under Marsha Pétain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966). Paxton, *Old Guard*. Michael R. Maurrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1981).

<sup>67</sup> Sarah Fishman, "The Power of Myth: Five Recent Works on Vichy France," *The Journal of Modern History* 67, no. 3 (1995), 666. Also useful is the edited collection by Sarah Fishman and others, *France at War: Vichy and the Historians* (Oxford: Berg, 2000).

Vichy policies were foreshadowed in the Third Republic, Nord rightly emphasises the need to consider them as part of a wider, more continuous phenomenon: *Vichy avant Vichy* and *Vichy après Vichy*.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Passmore has focused upon the French Right in order to show the extent to which Vichy's own ideologies had long historical roots but were at the same time far from coherent, and indeed shifted throughout the war.<sup>69</sup> Julian Jackson's excellent and massive study on France from 1940-1944 not only emphasises the need to consider Vichy from within a broader historical scope, but also provides a highly detailed analysis of the period from intellectual, popular and political perspectives.<sup>70</sup> Discussions of Vichy are a natural point from which to broach another, related section of World War Two historiography that is of particular importance: the role of empires.

### Empires in Conflict

Imperial clashes are a focal point in this study and are the framework through which Anglo-French relations will be analysed. There is a very broad historiography covering this area, which often focuses upon particular regions of one or the other empire. On the other hand, Ashley Jackson's *The British Empire and the Second World War* stands out as the most comprehensive publication dealing with the British perspective on the entirety of its global possessions during this period.<sup>71</sup> John Darwin's *The Empire Project* provides a broader overview of Britain's empire, which spans the mid nineteenth century to the early twentieth. Darwin's synthesis of the pre-war and post-war empire effectively challenges the use of "imperial overstretch" to explain British imperial evacuation beginning in the late 1940s.<sup>72</sup> Talbot Imlay's comparative study of French and British strategy during the war argues that, in contrast to the imperial-mindedness of the British, with the exception of North Africa and

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<sup>68</sup> Nord, *France's New*, 50.

<sup>69</sup> Kevin Passmore, *The Right in France from the Third Republic to Vichy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 351.

<sup>70</sup> Jackson, *The Dark Years*.

<sup>71</sup> Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (New York: Hambledon Continuum, 2006).

<sup>72</sup> John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 477. See chapters 11, 12 for Second World War.

Algeria, empire played a minimal role in French planning.<sup>73</sup> Without disagreeing with this assessment, my study will take a different tactic. Particularly on the French side, empire was not just a source for manpower and material resources, but a means to symbolically demonstrate continued power and future greatness. Studies that examine the importance of empire both during and after Vichy occupy an important place in the current historiography. Martin Thomas's extensive work dealing with both wartime and post-war perceptions of empire as a vital part of French identity emphasises the fact that British actions in the Middle East routinely placed strategic advantage over Free French claims.<sup>74</sup> Ruth Ginio has studied Vichy's attempts to mobilise empire as a sign of legitimacy in West Africa.<sup>75</sup> Likewise, Bruce Marshall, Martin Shipway and Andrew Shennan have all contributed important perspectives on the extent to which maintenance of the empire in the early post war years was a necessary component of France's planned national renewal.<sup>76</sup> The assumptions in these studies, namely of the perceived importance of empire from perspectives of culture and prestige provide crucial grounding for this analysis. Specifically, as will become particularly clear in the final chapters, which examine Anglo-French clashes in the Levant, maintaining *control* over the demise of the mandate was crucial for preserving French legitimacy and therefore actual power over her remaining African territories and French Indo China.

As Susan Pedersen has pointed out in her in-depth study of the League of Nations Permanent Mandate Commission (LON PMC), mandate holders employed rhetoric as a means to demonstrate that their actions were in

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<sup>73</sup> Talbot C. Imlay, *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics and Economics in Britain and France 1938-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 18.

<sup>74</sup> Martin Thomas, *The French Empire at War 1940-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 107. See also, Martin Thomas, Bob Moore and L.J. Butler, *Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe's Imperial States, 1918-1975* (London: Hodder Education, 2008).

<sup>75</sup> Ruth Ginio, *French Colonialism Unmasked: The Vichy Years in French West Africa* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

<sup>76</sup> Bruce D. Marshall, *The French Colonial Myth and Constitution-Making in the Fourth Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973). Martin Shipway, *The Road to War: France and Vietnam, 1944-1947* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003). Andrew Shennan, *Rethinking France: Plans for Renewal 1940-1946* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

accordance with the values of the PMC.<sup>77</sup> In a similar fashion, as decolonisation loomed larger in the war years, disparities between French rhetoric and material capabilities became more evident. Frederick Cooper's work on decolonisation in French and British Africa warns of the danger of reading decolonisation backwards. The tendency to explain decolonisation from either a top down (national triumph) or bottom up (coloniser initiative) approach fails to see the process as it was: complex, contradictory and hugely uncertain.<sup>78</sup> This study, while agreeing with Cooper's assertion, will examine Anglo-French imperial relations through the lens of rhetoric, illustrating how both sides employed and were constrained by targeted justifications towards a unique set of audiences. For example, British rhetoric sought to garner Syrian, and thereby broader Arab goodwill with the goal of maintaining strategic and economic resources within the region. The ultimate fate of both French and British influence in the Middle East can only be understood by examining the geopolitical motives, actual power capabilities and often-contradictory use of rhetoric that made up the policies on both sides. In this sense, rhetoric can become a limiting factor on policy manoeuvres. The need to be seen as acting in accordance with principle or the demands of Arab clients can limit the range of options available. A host of regional studies addressing British actions in the Middle East, and most notably, the importance of Palestine as, at once, a regional flashpoint and an acid test of British imperial capabilities, have again deepened our understanding of economic and political factors in particular. As mentioned earlier, a more detailed examination of this literature will be included in the three relevant chapters on the Levant; however, it is worth highlighting a few studies here.

Prolific authors like William Roger Louis have analysed the complex environment that was unfolding as the Second World War came to a close, rightly identifying the inconsistencies that existed between the possibility of Franco-Syrian reconciliation and the preservation of British influence.<sup>79</sup> This

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<sup>77</sup> Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), esp. introduction.

<sup>78</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labour Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6-7.

<sup>79</sup> Wm. Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945-1951, Arab Nationalism, the United States and Postwar Imperialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 147. Wm. Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States*



issue of British and French strategic interests and the ensuing struggle with nationalist demands has been well documented by scholars including Philip Khoury, A.B. Gaunson, James Gelvin, Jennifer Dueck, Aviel Roshwald and Yehoshua Porath. Porath's study illustrates particularly well the part played by the pan-Arab movement and the consequent motivations behind British Foreign Office decisions, which always weighed likely Arab reactions to Palestinian partition.<sup>80</sup> However, as will become increasingly clear, what such works do not do is provide a link between British depictions of themselves as a benign regional arbiter and their underlying economic and political motives in the wider Middle East region. This study will attempt to fill that gap by reassessing Anglo-French imperial strategies in the region, and more especially, the ways in which British policies in particular were portrayed and communicated in such a way as to gain the trust of local nationalist groups, American and global audiences respectively.

### Conclusion

Negotiating a field as well researched as the Second World War is never an easy task. However, the addition of new ways of looking at this period can add another dimension of analysis. Not only does this research employ a trans-national and comparative perspective, it offers a way to better understand policy making by linking it to its intended audience(s) through rhetoric. No other work currently provides this link between the formation of official policy and the limitations imposed upon it by outside factors that include perceptions of public opinion, global (in this instance often anti-imperial) reactions, and the requirement to preserve key alliances. This perspective has great potential, both as an approach to historical studies and as a way in which to better understand why contemporary policy makers continue to mobilise historic "lessons" as a way to justify controversial policies.

The chapters that follow argue that rhetoric is an inherent part of the policy making process, particularly when policies are likely to cause controversy in one or more areas of the public sphere. Concerns over likely public reactions not only impact the decision-making process, they affect the manner in which

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*and the Decolonisation of the British Empire 1941-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

<sup>80</sup> Yehoshua Porath, *In Search of Arab Unity 1930-1945* (London: Frank Cass, 1986), 110.

decisions and their outcomes are portrayed and justified. While many studies make casual reference to the fact that policy makers were aware of and tried at times to limit press publicity surrounding a particular policy or operation, these are only surface level observations. This study digs deeper, illustrating *how* leaders deliberately constructed justifications for policies *as part of* the decision making process. When rhetoric contradicted, as it often did, underlying strategic and economic policies, these strains had a real impact upon both British and French room to manoeuvre. Between the highly fraught days of 1940 and the more victory-assured period of 1945, sustaining gaps between a rhetoric full of good intentions and a policy committed to maintaining economic and strategic interests in a region that demanded unfettered independence would become increasingly difficult. On all sides, British, Free French and Vichy leaders mobilised rhetoric variously as a means to justify controversial policies, to contest the legitimacy of their rivals' claims to imperial or sovereign rights, and to lay claim to foreign territory. On all sides rhetoric mattered. Acknowledging its importance helps unlock complex relationships on a metropolitan, diplomatic, and imperial level.

## Chapter 2: Justifying Defeat Responding to the Dunkirk Evacuations and the Fall of France

### Introduction

The Second World War is of huge significance in British cultural and historic memory. References to Anglo-French wartime relations are often met with knowing glances and unsubtle comparisons between British bravery and French defeat. However, true understanding of this complex relationship can only be reached by looking beyond the flat assumptions of what it means to win or lose. This chapter will expand upon the complexities of the Anglo-French relationship - analysing how it was shaped and perceived by policy makers and the broader wartime public - between late May and June 1940. Contextually, it is essential to recall that the relationship between the two wartime allies was constantly being debated and subtly reconstructed. Rhetoric was intrinsic to this process of alliance refinement, and, once France confronted defeat, helped facilitate a shift in British popular perceptions of the war in the West as a uniquely British struggle. Equally, rhetorical arguments provided the framework within which the very identity and future of France was reconceptualised: in France, in its empire and in Britain too.

The collapse of France in June 1940 would hasten what had previously been a tentative loosening of alliance bonds, both at an official and popular level as each side struggled to redefine its position within the altered strategic context of France's surrender. In the years leading up to the outbreak of war, the Anglo-French relationship had fluctuated, the Entente Cordiale enduring throughout largely to the exclusion of a formal - and reciprocal - military alliance. Although the French had initiated intensive negotiations with Britain in 1919 and again in 1921, with the goal of creating a formal alliance, both public and parliamentary opinion in Britain shied away from any such binding continental commitments.<sup>1</sup> The outbreak of war 20 years later, however, catalysed unprecedented levels of cooperation including the formation of the Supreme War Council as well as financial and economic coordination designed to make

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<sup>1</sup> J.F.V. Keiger, "Perfidious Albion?' French Perceptions of Britain as an Ally after the First World War," in *Knowing Your Friends: Intelligence Inside Alliances and Coalitions from 1914 to the Cold War*, ed. Martin S. Alexander (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 40.

the Anglo-French alliance concluded six months earlier a meaningful reality.<sup>2</sup> Following the German invasion of the Low Countries on 10 May 1940, events moved quickly, leading to the ultimate French decision to request armistice terms through the intermediary of Francisco Franco's Spain on 16/17 June. In the days following this request, uncertainty persisted on both sides. Doubts were sustained by coalescing around the belief – perhaps more hope than expectation – that French officials might yet proceed to North Africa to continue the struggle from the heart of their African Empire. Fears that Germany would otherwise move swiftly to secure the French Empire and France's Oceanic fleet only increased official anxiety in Britain about the choices the French government, which by then had evacuated from Paris to Bordeaux, might make.

Immediately following the signature of the armistice, and arguably long after, there has been a sustained attempt on the part of both academics and others to *explain*, and in some cases justify, the defeat. Issues of French societal division, allegations of defeatism and strategic wrong-headedness have figured largest. Marc Bloch's well-known work, *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940*, illustrates the extent to which even contemporaneous imagery depicted France as rotting from within, with governmental structures beginning to "give off the smell of a dry-rot which it had acquired in small cafés and obscure back rooms."<sup>3</sup> Since the publication of Bloch's searing account in the immediate aftermath of the fall of France, the cause of defeat has remained a subject of controversy. The British official history attributes the French withdrawal to a lack of leadership.<sup>4</sup> Scholars have amassed a huge amount of documentary material, the bulk of which focuses upon arguments surrounding the quality of military forces, materials and leadership, (mis)perceptions of German intentions and of course, national decadence.<sup>5</sup> Interpretations such as

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Bell, "Entente Broken and Renewed: Britain and France, 1940-1945," in *Anglo-French Relations in the Twentieth Century: Rivalry and Cooperation*, eds. Alan Sharp and Glyn Stone (London: Routledge, 2000), 223.

<sup>3</sup> Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), 157.

<sup>4</sup> Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1962), 55.

<sup>5</sup> Ernst R. May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000); Raymond Aron, *the Century of Total War* trans. E.W. Dicks and O.S. Griffiths (London: Derek Vershoyle, 1954). Robert Alan Doughty, *The Breaking Point: Sedan and the Fall of France, 1940* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1990).

Bloch's, which attempted to pin the cause of the defeat on societal malaise were subject to revision – but, crucially, not to outright rejection - in the 1970s. Scholars such as PMH Bell used the infamous report, "British Strategy in a Certain Eventuality," to analyse how the British government attempted to bolster French morale at the close of May even while resolving to fight on alone if necessary.<sup>6</sup> That Philip Nord's recent book *France 1940* continues to challenge long-standing perceptions of national decadence is proof of the extent to which the original explanation has clung on.<sup>7</sup> These later works have placed a stronger emphasis upon political, economic and military factors, an understandable response given the availability of newly opened archival sources. Max Egremont's biography of Edward Spears describes, but does not elaborate upon, the decision-making environment in the early days of the conflict. In particular, the extent to which policy makers planned for the present battle from within the shadow of 1914 was notable.<sup>8</sup> There exists a broad swathe of specialist studies that place the Anglo-French relationship into a wider context, one in which the very idea of two united nation states marshalled for war remained profoundly complicated by long-standing questions of contested identity and evidence of serious domestic and colonial division.<sup>9</sup> The traditional historiography of the French defeat was immediately split between arguments that privileged either perceived societal polarization or fatal military inadequacies. Both lines of argument have been criticised by Talbot Imlay for "drawing grand judgements from narrow accounts."<sup>10</sup> Joel Blatt's edited collection on the French defeat addresses these historiographical shortfalls particularly well. It contributes a more nuanced understanding of the defeat as a

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<sup>6</sup> PMH Bell, *A Certain Eventuality: Britain and the Fall of France* (London: Saxon House, 1974), 118.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Nord, *France 1940: Defending the Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), the introduction includes an especially good summary of the present historiography explaining the French defeat in 1940.

<sup>8</sup> Max Egremont, *Under Two Flags, The Life of Major General Sir Edward Spears* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997), Chapter 10.

<sup>9</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). P.M.H. Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940, Entente & Estrangement* (Essex: Longman, 1996). Robert Tombs and Isabelle Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy: The French and the British from the Sun King to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Talbot C. Imlay, *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics, and Economics in Britain and France 1938-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.

product of strategic and social factors.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, works that encompass a broader scope such as Julian Jackson's *France the Dark Years* rightfully point out the need to understand the recasting of French identities that followed the defeat as the product of social divisions and cultural strains that were present since the founding of the Third Republic.<sup>12</sup>

Continuing along these more recent analyses, the experience of the French defeat on both sides cannot be understood or explained simply by determining or debating the underlying causal factors. However, the final days of May up through the signing of the Franco-German armistice will serve here as a useful jumping off point from which to understand how the conflict would be described, justified and interpreted on all sides. The days which progressed from the Dunkirk evacuations until the armistice came into effect in late June would be fraught with uncertainty, and notably, a gradual shift in rhetorical portrayals of the conflict and its key participants. June 1940 would, in retrospect, become the point at which Anglo-French wartime experience parted ways. However, in the midst of the crisis, the immediate situation was much more complex. As will be demonstrated, the collapse of France was less a surprise than a new, and initially uncertain, phase of the conflict, in which alliances had to be realigned and redefined. Rather than focussing upon why the French defeat took place, this chapter will examine the development of rhetoric in the events leading up to and following the request for and acceptance of a Franco-German armistice. Specifically, it will seek to understand how different groups attempted to frame the defeat, establishing blame upon a specific group of men, a national illness or the traitorous actions of the Belgian King, Leopold. The imagery and arguments that were established during this period of extreme uncertainty would form the framework around which individuals and groups would take sides and attempt to influence others to confirm their chosen course of action. Most notably, this period would see the beginning of Anglo-French attempts to each establish the credibility of their actions in the eyes of the United States and their own publics.

The proliferation of blame literature in the wake of the defeat, despite its obvious obsession with the idea of establishing and placing a kind of moral

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<sup>11</sup> Joel Blatt, "Introduction," in *The French Defeat of 1940: Reassessments*, ed. Joel Blatt (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1998), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years 1940-1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 26.

sanction upon the failed Third Republic, nevertheless offers valuable insights into the immediate desire to understand and prevent another such catastrophe.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, attempts by both the French and British to explain this new wartime context were based on a desire to confirm and legitimise present actions within the framework of the broader struggle. While Pétain would establish promises of French renewal, British rhetoric would focus upon the necessity of sacrifice in order to guarantee future victory. The mobilisation of blame would be an important part of the rhetoric of both sides, and would establish a framework of interpretation, which would be employed throughout the conflict. British attempts to maintain sympathy for the broader French public would be carried out directly against the newly formed Pétain government. Rhetoric that challenged the constitutionality of this government and therefore the decision to seek an armistice would be directly linked to material concerns such as the fate of the French fleet and the loyalty of the French Empire.

The scope of this chapter will encompass events from late May, focussing upon the lead up to the Dunkirk evacuations and including the backlash of negative sentiment towards the Belgian capitulation on 28 May. It will follow the progression of rhetorical responses in the press and political spheres up until the publication of the armistice terms in late June. This approach will illustrate how both sides gradually and tentatively redefined the conflict in line with their new status either as a belligerent or a (proposed) neutral. Importantly, these shifts included a renegotiation of the alliance around the presumed outcome of the war and the legality of the new French government. Questions of honour and loyalty, which had been crucial in Leopold's demise, would be less pronounced, indeed largely lacking, in the initial British response to the French armistice, growing stronger only when it became clear that the armistice, far from an attempt to rally the population to continue the fight from abroad, was likely to be accepted. This sense of uncertainty, between 17-22 June, has largely been missing from analyses of this period, and illustrates lingering hopes that remained a part of press and public sentiment.

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<sup>13</sup> Most notably, Andre Geraud's *The Gravediggers of France*, Andre Simon's *J'Accuse! The Men Who Betrayed France*, and Louis Levy's *The Truth about France*. Referenced from: Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.

The following sections will proceed chronologically, beginning in late May and ending in late June. This will best demonstrate the emergence of themes as each side responded to the rapidly changing environment. The first section will focus upon British and French policy in later May. Specifically, it will examine how, on the British side, material considerations coupled with the desire to sustain French morale impacted the decision-making process. The rhetorical limitations and exaggerations that resulted from such a policy would have implications later. This idea will be explored in detail in the second section, which will examine press and public reactions in the wake of the Dunkirk evacuations and the realisation that claims of RAF superiority were largely fabricated. The final two sections will examine the initial reaction to the French request for an armistice, followed by the subsequent acceptance of terms. In particular, the final section will demonstrate a hardening of British sentiment towards what was then referred to as the Bordeaux government. Portrayals of the government as unrepresentative of the broader population would form the basis for British representations throughout the conflict.

Ultimately, why does this type of interpretation or analysis matter? In short, both British and French political forces prioritised the need to justify important decisions through official announcements and carefully crafted speeches. Rhetoric mattered, because policy makers *believed*, and for that matter still believe, in the role it had in shaping public sentiment both locally and globally. Rhetoric provided the means to shape and defend actions as well as describe how those choices would define the future of each nation. The broader themes of morality, decay, rebirth and justice that manifested themselves repeatedly must be considered as part of the decision-making process. Today, Churchill's words are remembered as almost prophetic. But, between 1940-1945 the rhetorical battles that accompanied each facet of foreign policy were far from decisive. By focussing upon the *process* of decision making, rhetorical studies are able to illustrate its uncertainties and hesitations and avoid focussing upon the known outcomes – defeat or victory. More importantly, they demonstrate how policy makers attempted to minimise the possibility of dissent by pre-crafting arguments that drove home the validity of actions taken. Thus, this approach can grant insight into this complex period and draw connections between official policy and its portrayal through alternately moral, rational, and patriotic constructs.



## Expectations of Victory

Well before the conflict had developed into the global struggle it became, British policy makers were laying the groundwork for a campaign that they hoped would sustain morale and active participation in the war effort. Such efforts would obviously be varied and far-reaching. Drawing on previously discussed distinctions between rhetoric and propaganda, the analyses that follow will focus upon the former concept. In either case, however, the general belief in the importance of stimulating, influencing and tracking public sentiment is important because it showcases the perceived potential of persuasive text and imagery. As early as April 1939 a report identified the need to personalise propaganda messages in recognition of regional and viewpoint variations. In regards to the actual persuasive power of such a campaign, the report speculated: "The English people, being, in the broadest sense, idealistic and illogical in temperament, are probably at least averagely susceptible to propaganda (more so than the French)."<sup>14</sup> In France the creation of the *Service Général d'Information* served similarly to conduct wartime operations "in the moral and psychological domain..."<sup>15</sup> More than a year later, in late May 1940, British officials would continue to cite the importance of maintaining public confidence. A crucial part of their attempts would be based on the argument of final assured victory. Enter inevitability, a theme that remained at the heart of British rhetoric throughout the conflict. However, as events progressed throughout May and June, imagery of victory would increasingly be associated with past British rather than Anglo-French successes.

British policy in late May was balanced between two contradictory approaches. First, there was a real recognition of the *possibility* of French defeat, which led to an effort to preserve material for home defence. Anglo-French policy prior to the evacuations remained uncertain; the possibility of an approach to Italy, although divisive, had not yet been shelved.<sup>16</sup> However, these precautions were carried out alongside efforts to sustain both French and British

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<sup>14</sup> "International Propaganda and Broadcasting Enquiry, Possible Lines of Activity now Open to the Home Publicity Enquiry," 12 April 1939, CAB 102/374, The National Archives [Henceforward TNA].

<sup>15</sup> "Instruction pour la creation de la Service Général d'Information," 15 June 1940, F/41/13-F/41-14, Archives Nationales [Henceforward AN].

<sup>16</sup> Woodward, *British Foreign Policy*, 52.

morale. They suppressed speculations about strains in the relationship and maintained claims that the RAF was successfully engaging with the enemy and assisting as the evacuation at Dunkirk proceeded. Following Churchill's 16 May visit to Paris, Foreign Office intelligence concluded that the German breakthrough had resulted in "a severe shock...to the whole of French public opinion."<sup>17</sup> Reynaud's panicked air, and proclamations that the war was lost, contributed to the British decision to prepare for the possibility of a French withdrawal. The French, similarly, were considering the possibility of defeat by 25 May. Possible options were discussed within the *Comite de Guerre*.<sup>18</sup> The previously mentioned report, "British Strategy in a Certain Eventuality," argued that the British people could stand up to the strain of aerial bombardment and pinpointed economic warfare as a vital component in a British victory.<sup>19</sup> The events that unfolded in the days that followed have been well studied and will not be examined in detail here. Rather, analysis will be focussed upon the subtle rhetorical shifts that began to take place as each player started to renegotiate his place in or outside of the conflict. Contradictions in words and actions illustrate the complexity of this period. While Britain prepared to withhold resources for the defence of the island, they mobilised a contrary rhetoric of grand gestures and proclamations in an effort to stave off French withdrawal as long as possible.

By 21 May, the Anglo-French alliance appeared to be holding together, at least according to the brave assertions of the political and military leadership. Reynaud made a series of addresses to the Senate, which, although grave, professed a renewed sense of purpose. Despite General Maurice Gamelin's sterling reputation as the man who had turned back the Germans at the 1914 Battle of the Marne and salvaged French affairs during the 1925 Druze revolt in Syria, Reynaud replaced him with General Maxime Weygand on 19 May. Weygand proclaimed that he was "full of confidence provided everyone does his duty with a fierce energy."<sup>20</sup> However, as the German armies approached the channel ports the situation appeared bleak and on 26 May Churchill gave the order to begin evacuation at Dunkirk as part of Operation Dynamo. This

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<sup>17</sup> Weekly Political Intelligence Summaries, 22 May 1940, FO 371/25235, TNA.

<sup>18</sup> Bell, *Entente Broken*, 225-226.

<sup>19</sup> "British Strategy in a Certain Eventuality," Report by the Chiefs of Staff, 25 May 1940, CAB 66/7/48, TNA.

<sup>20</sup> R. Campbell to Foreign Office, 22 May 1940, FO 371/24310, TNA.

order, which acknowledged the seriousness of events on the ground, was in sharp contrast to the positive press response toward Allied efforts. The French press was not only positive; it gave high praise to the British contribution. *Justice* wrote, "The French are courageous. The British manly and tenacious. With such qualities associated for the triumph of the same ideal, we are invincible."<sup>21</sup> Minister of Information Duff Cooper had made similar assurances in a Home Service broadcast on 21 May. Regardless of setbacks, he argued, "The end of this battle, whatever it may be, *cannot* (my italics) entail the defeat of Great Britain or France in the war."<sup>22</sup> This observation, of the inevitability of victory based upon moral ideals rather than military or material superiority would be a key component of first Anglo-French and then British rhetoric. French, or Vichy rhetoric, to the contrary, would employ a series of justifications for defeat based around statistical material inferiority and social decadence. Prior to this departure, however, both French and British policy makers supported and made claims that eventual victory was still assured.

The capitulation of King Leopold of Belgium on 28 May, although a disaster militarily, was an opportunity for French and British sources to provide renewed assurances of victory. These assurances were fuelled by disgust over his immoral and traitorous actions. Reynaud's broadcast in response to the capitulation - "Our faith in victory remains complete" - was consistent with the optimism present throughout the mass media and reported public opinion.<sup>23</sup> The Dunkirk evacuations progressed from 26 May, and during this time press sources regularly cited approval of Weygand and the belief that strong Allied resistance was wearing down their German rivals.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Cooper believed that public sentiment was too optimistic and urged the War Cabinet to make a frank public statement via the BBC. He feared that over optimism, followed by disaster at Dunkirk, would result in promises of eventual victory being discredited.<sup>25</sup> Weygand recalled in his own memoirs that Reynaud had argued for equal evacuation of French and British troops in order to avoid

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<sup>21</sup> R. Campbell to Foreign Office, 27 May 1940, FO 371/24310, TNA.

<sup>22</sup> "The Situation – As it Is Tonight," Home Service Broadcast, 21 May 1940, DUFC 8/1/20, Churchill Archive Centre, [Henceforward CA].

<sup>23</sup> R. Campbell to Foreign Office, 28 May 1940, FO 371/24310, TNA.

<sup>24</sup> J.L. Garvin, "Britain at Bay: Our Army and its Bases," *Observer*, 26 May 1940, 6. "Full Blooded' Offensives Repulsed by Allies," *The Guardian*, 27 May 1940, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Cabinet Conclusion, 28 May 1940, CAB 65/7/39, TNA.

compromising public perceptions of the future of the alliance.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, there was little belief within parliament itself that the evacuations had any hope of success. Churchill estimated that no more than 50,000 individuals would be taken off.<sup>27</sup> While the British press began to take on a more serious tone following Leopold's withdrawal, reports from France betrayed a similarly optimistic assumption that lines on the Somme and Aisne would be firmly held.<sup>28</sup>

This tendency to waver between concern and optimism was symptomatic of the public reacting first to news of the Belgian capitulation then to the implications that this had for the evacuating French and British forces. Both sides attempted to withhold information from the public in order to avoid massive swings either toward over optimism or deep pessimism. Nevertheless, although outright speculations concerning the likely success or failure of the evacuations were largely absent, political rhetoric continued to assert that no matter the outcome, victory was still assured. Proclamations and broadcasts were duplicated in the press on both sides, demonstrating continued resolve in the conflict and the alliance.<sup>29</sup> These intense efforts were aimed at creating a framework in which the public could not perceive the possibility of defeat. Cooper broadcast on 28 May, noting the seriousness of the situation, but offering the belief that "there should be no loss of complete confidence in our ability to achieve ultimate victory."<sup>30</sup> Reynaud's 28 May broadcast was also given much publicity, and itself served to shift blame for the current situation by pointing out that the Belgian withdrawal had opened the Dunkirk route to German divisions.<sup>31</sup> Drawing out the imagery employed by both sides during the final days of May highlights the symbolic role that rhetoric often plays in constructing arguments that will influence the opinions of key groups and individuals. Most notably, on the basis of appearing strong, Britain argued that

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<sup>26</sup> Maxmine Weygand, *Recalled to Service*, trans. E.W. Dickes (Melbourne: William Heinemann Ltd., 1952), 87.

<sup>27</sup> John Lukacs, *Five Days in London, May 1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 175.

<sup>28</sup> R. Campbell to Foreign Office, 29 May 1940, FO 371/24310, TNA.

<sup>29</sup> "Les commandements britannique et français ont pris leurs dispositions," *Echo d'Alger*, 29 May 1940, 1. "Reynaud tells France: Leopold's Act No Precedent in History," *The Guardian*, 29 May 1940, 7.

<sup>30</sup> "Belgian Capitulation", Home Service Programme, 28 May 1940, DUFC 8/2/17, CA.

<sup>31</sup> "Le discours radiodiffusé de M. Paul Reynaud," *Le Temps*, 29 May 1940, 1.

French desires to make a direct petition to the U.S. for assistance should be avoided. War Cabinet discussion concluded that such an appeal would only “confirm American fears as to our weakness, and would not produce the desired effect.”<sup>32</sup> The at times conflicting desire to maintain the Anglo-French struggle, while also preparing for the dissolution of the partnership was evidence of the broader contextual uncertainty. A message from Churchill, circulated within the government, made it clear that speculations over the French making a separate peace should not be entertained; however, regardless of what happened in the coming weeks, Britain would continue the fight.<sup>33</sup>

British policy in the midst and immediate aftermath of Dynamo was centred upon the desire to keep French forces in the war as long as possible. However, these efforts were often focussed upon the rhetorical level and were, at the same time, closely linked to preparations for home defence. A few voices in the government, most notably Permanent Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs Alexander Cadogan, had expressed the belief that the British would be better off without the French. His rational calculation that the provision of British air protection would leave Britain defenceless was coupled with the more emotive claim that the French were “quite helpless and [had] no stomach for the fight.”<sup>34</sup> On 28 May Reynaud suggested making an appeal for aid to the United States, a move the Foreign Office criticised as engendering weakness and panic. It would be more expedient, they argued, to make a public statement regarding British commitment to the fight ahead.<sup>35</sup> The ultimate success of the evacuation, which carried off 316,663 men between 26 May and 4 June, was greeted with a great deal of relief, although policy makers found themselves struggling to moderate the public response.<sup>36</sup> Although successful as a withdrawal operation, decision makers hoped to frame the event as a precursor for the difficult fight ahead. The coming days saw renewed confidence among the British public and a decrease in criticisms of the French. However, as the crisis drew to a close, opinion reports recorded that morale was almost “too good” and that elation directed at the return of the BEF resulted in a failure to understand the

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<sup>32</sup> War Cabinet 145 (40) Conclusions, 28 May 1940, CAB 65/7/40, TNA.

<sup>33</sup> Circulation, Churchill, 29 May 1940, PREM 4/68/9, TNA.

<sup>34</sup> Alexander Cadogan, *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938-1945*, ed. David Dilks (London: Cassell, 1971), 293.

<sup>35</sup> Woodward, *British Foreign Policy*, 54.

<sup>36</sup> “Official Report from Operation Dynamo,” Office of the Flag Officer Commanding, Dover, 18 June 1940, SMVL 7, CA.

significance of the event.<sup>37</sup> The following section will expand upon the reactions to the Dunkirk evacuations in early June, up until the French armistice request on 17 June, examining how the conflict was portrayed and understood within the press and by the public.

### **Interpretations of the Dunkirk Evacuations**

Before the evacuation had been carried off successfully, the British public displayed an early tendency to criticise their French counterparts based, most notably, around rumours of their likely capitulation.<sup>38</sup> However, a perceived change in military fortunes resulted in a sharp decline in criticism. Analysts considered this decline was in part due to positive press treatment of the fighting abilities of the French army.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, press emphases on the heroic action of the men taking part in the evacuations left no doubt as to the solidity of the Anglo-French relationship. One article cited the “Anglo-French brotherhood” as “a demonstration of the supreme vitality of the youth of the two countries.”<sup>40</sup> The French press similarly focussed upon the heroic efforts of French and British forces, and also reported stunning RAF victories. One article reported the downing of 56 planes in a single day as the evacuation was carried out. On the other hand, J.B. Priestley’s 5 June broadcast claimed that the ability to carry out the operations when failure loomed was a sign of that special English ability to right a “miserable blunder.”<sup>41</sup> In the days to follow, claims of the superior efforts of the RAF would come into question, thus undermining some of the credibility of government and press rhetoric. Similarly, increasing uncertainty centred upon the French war effort would become more evident in the wake of the jubilation of the evacuations. Churchill’s depiction of sentiment in late May appears to be greatly exaggerated, as it presents a retrospective view of total

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<sup>37</sup> “Public Opinion on the Present Crisis,” 3 June 1940, INF 1/264, TNA.

<sup>38</sup> “Public Opinion on the Present Crisis,” 27 May 1940 (includes 26), INF 1/264, TNA.

<sup>39</sup> “Public Opinion on the Present Crisis,” 31 May 1940, INF 1/264, TNA.

<sup>40</sup> Our Own Correspondent, “Anglo-French Brotherhood’s Supreme Example: Profound Effect of Dunkirk Battle,” *The Guardian*, 1 June 1940, 9.

<sup>41</sup> J.B. Priestley, ‘Broadcast from June 5 1940’, taken from Sonya O. Rose, *Which People’s War? National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.

self-assurance: "There was a white glow, overpowering, sublime, which ran through our island from end to end."<sup>42</sup>

Leo Amery, newly appointed to the India Office, had high praise for Churchill as a war leader and expressed his own jubilation over the success of the Dunkirk evacuations. Nevertheless, by early June, he wrote of his own and Churchill's fear that the French line would break under attack, leading directly to their exit from the war.<sup>43</sup> Churchill's private secretary John Colville recorded in his diary that telephone calls from Reynaud requesting more planes and troops were a source of annoyance to Churchill, who was focussed upon the consolidation of the home front and preservation of valuable resources but aware of the need to sustain French morale, giving it "no excuse for a collapse."<sup>44</sup> At the same time, tension was building in response to discussion surrounding the lack of air support available during the operations. Grandiose claims about the feats of the RAF were in sharp contrast with the stories of returning soldiers.<sup>45</sup> The Ministry of Information (MOI) reported that first hand stories from returnees of the BEF saying that the RAF was not in evidence during the evacuation were leading to increasing doubts over the truthfulness of the broadcasts and press reports of RAF feats.<sup>46</sup> Public frustrations over the lack of accurate news and the marked depth of official censorship can provide insights into how rhetoric was assessed against perceived events. Throughout the conflict, public opinion analyses pointed to the value that the public placed upon pragmatic accounts of events. In turn, the care that leading officials began to take in drafting justifications for potentially controversial policies emphasised the perceived importance of public opinion and by association, the rhetoric that helped structure these opinions.

The success of the evacuations, however, rallied spirits in the short term. As Martin Alexander has pointed out, Dunkirk, while rapidly becoming proof of the British ability to muddle through, was also recognised by British civilians as

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<sup>42</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. 2, *Their Finest Hour* (London: Cassell & Co. Ltd, 1949), 88.

<sup>43</sup> Leo Amery, Transcribed Diary, 4 June 1940, AMEL 7/34, CA.

<sup>44</sup> Sir John Colville, private diaries, 1 June 1940, CLVL 1/2, CA.

<sup>45</sup> "Towards the End in Flanders: Bulk of BEF Withdrawn, German Air Raids in the South of France, Another 113 Planes Fall to RAF," *The Guardian*, 3 June 1940, 5. "4 to 1 Gains by RAF: Dunkirk Air Battles 169 Nazi Planes in 3 Days," *The Guardian*, 3 June 1940, 5.

<sup>46</sup> "Public Opinion on the Present Crisis," 3 June 1940, INF 1/264, TNA.

an episode in which the French had taken the brunt of the attack.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, French portrayals in early June remained positive, referencing the glorious feats and resistance of the French and British fighting forces.<sup>48</sup> Anglo-French rhetoric in the aftermath of Dunkirk remained positive even if doubts existed on both sides regarding the sustainability of the French effort. The success of the Anglo-French alliance was largely portrayed through imagery that lauded the final outcome (victory) as inevitable. This sense of inevitability, crucially, was not based upon material superiority or preparedness, but rather, upon an interpretation of the conflict as one of good vs. evil or man vs. machine, and grounded in a historical understanding, which looked back at past British victories as assurance of this outcome. This idea was particularly strong in First Lord of the Admiralty, A.V. Alexander's empire broadcast, which portrayed the Germans as sadistic murderers. It is worth quoting at length:

We have proved to the world what we ourselves have always known – that the free men of the democracies are man for man superior, not merely to the masses of German infantry herded into the fight, but also to the specially trained fanatics of the German shock troops whose minds have been systematically perverted in order to make them ruthless killers of innocent men, women and children.<sup>49</sup>

Press stories focussed upon scenes of heroism and unity, mobilising Dunkirk as a symbolic success, which again served as confirmation of the final outcome. One French article described with emotion the scene as heroes disembarked in England.<sup>50</sup> There was a strong sense that despite the superior mechanised equipment and numbers of men on the German side, being on the 'right' or moral side of the war effort would assure an eventual Allied victory. Broadcasts aimed at the empire, as well as the U.S., argued that the spirit of the BEF was responsible for the success of the evacuations and their "refusal to

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<sup>47</sup> Martin S. Alexander, "Dunkirk in Military Operations, Myths and Memories," in *Britain and France in Two World Wars: Truth, Myth and Memory*, eds. Robert Tombs and Emile Chabal (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 100.

<sup>48</sup> "Les opérations militaires: La belle résistance de Dunkerque," *Le Temps*, 3 June 1940, 1.

<sup>49</sup> "Broadcasts to the Empire," 12 June 1940, AVAR 13/2, CA.

<sup>50</sup> "La bataille de Dunkerque: Les héros des Flandres débarquent à Londres," *L'Echo d'Alger*, 3 June 1940, 1.



accept defeat” was “the guarantee of final victory.”<sup>51</sup> The mobilisation of American sentiment served as a way to highlight the success of the operation, while placing the Allied effort alongside the opinion of a powerful “neutral” state lent legitimacy to the war effort.<sup>52</sup> The high praise evident in the mass media and recorded in estimates of public opinion once again left some unease in political circles. Within the French government internal critique of British actions was rampant. The fact that there was not significant Anglophobia was due to the fact that these disputes were not made public.<sup>53</sup> Mass Observation diarists from London remained generally optimistic and reported that others around them also appeared steady, classifying Dunkirk as a great achievement. A London shopkeeper observed that citizens appeared calmer than in previous months.<sup>54</sup> Such observations led to fears that the evacuations engendered a worrying level of over optimism. Calls for revenge following German air raids on Paris on 4 June led the MOI to conclude that the public had no real understanding of the potential consequences of retaliatory raids on Germany.<sup>55</sup> Reports recommended rectifying the present interpretations of Dunkirk, which tended to see the retreat as not only a victory but as a “lasting achievement” and a sign that “we cannot ultimately be beaten.”<sup>56</sup> Churchill’s Commons speech, published widely on 5 June, attempted to drive home the struggle as one that called for perseverance and resistance. Although the tone of the address was broadly praised in the press, the MOI reported a slight increase in Anti-French sentiment, attributed to Churchill’s references to fighting alone.<sup>57</sup> What remains clear is that publically neither side engaged in anything resembling outright criticism or speculation on the future of the conflict aside from stressing that eventual victory was assured. French and British rhetoric alike praised the evacuation as a success. Churchill’s address was published widely in the French press, as was praise for the orderly manner in which the

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<sup>51</sup> “The “Battle of the Ports”: Mr. Eden’s Stirring Story of the Feat of the BEF,” *The Guardian*, 3 June 1940, 6. ““Triumph of an Army”: Four-Fifths of BEF Saved, Mr. Eden’s Tribute,” *The Times*, 3 June 1940, 3.

<sup>52</sup> “L’épopée des Flandres a frappé d’admiration l’opinion américaine,” *Echo d’Alger*, 4 June 1940, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Griffiths, *Marshal Pétain* (London: Constable, 1970), 231.

<sup>54</sup> Mass Observation Diary 5039.3, 29 May 1940, Mass Observation Archives, [Henceforward MOA].

<sup>55</sup> “Public Opinion on the Present Crisis,” 4 June 1940, INF 1/264, TNA.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> “Public Opinion on the Present Crisis,” 5 June 1940, INF 1/264, TNA.

evacuations had been carried out.<sup>58</sup> The “Spirit of Dunkirk,” it is fair to say, was not always an exclusively British memory.

Although public praise for the Anglo-French efforts continued following the evacuations, a growing sense of unease was present by 10 June. The negotiations that took place in the days leading up to Reynaud’s resignation and the French armistice request have been well documented and will only be briefly reviewed here. Reynaud’s 5 June Cabinet shuffle bringing in Paul Baudouin and Charles de Gaulle to assist in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence respectively had done little to quash creeping defeatist sentiment, although it finally removed Pétain’s nemesis in the Foreign Ministry, Edouard Daladier. On 15 June, British Ambassador Sir Ronald Campbell reported to the Foreign Office that Reynaud’s 13 June telegram to Roosevelt had made French continuation of the struggle virtually reliant on an American promise to enter the war at an early date. The telegram depicted a rapidly deteriorating situation. In the event of an armistice, Campbell and Churchill’s personal representative to Reynaud, Edward Spears, communicated their plan to obtain the scuttling of the fleet, but remarked that “we have little confidence now in anything.”<sup>59</sup> In the days immediately preceding the French armistice request, British policy operated on a number of fronts, consolidating steps to take in case of a French exit, but still acting to maintain a joint war effort for as long as possible. This latter tactic relied heavily on publically espousing both the strength of the alliance and the victory that would result. When Reynaud received a reply from Washington, the Foreign Office noted that the promises for material aid fell short of Reynaud’s expectations.<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless, Churchill attempted to bolster Reynaud by arguing that the content of Roosevelt’s message was sufficient assurance to continue the struggle. A telegram from Churchill for Reynaud drew directly from the latter’s 10 June speech, quoting a line that would bear striking resemblance to Churchill’s own famous address. “[The] cabinet is united in considering this magnificent document as decisive in favour of continued resistance of France in accordance with your own declaration of June 10 about fighting before Paris,

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<sup>58</sup> “La fin de la bataille des Flandres,” *Le Temps*, 6 June 1940, 1. “Les dernières forces de terre et de mer ont quitté Dunkerque en bon ordre,” *L’Echo d’Alger*, 5 June 1940, 1.

<sup>59</sup> R. Campbell to Foreign Office, 15 June 1940, FO 371/24310, TNA.

<sup>60</sup> Weekly Political Intelligence Summaries, 25 June 1940, FO 371/25235, TNA.

behind Paris, in a province or if necessary in Africa or across the Atlantic.”<sup>61</sup> This response, however, clearly was not consistent with British sentiment. A separate note would be sent privately to Roosevelt stressing the “moral and psychological effect” of American entrance into the war.<sup>62</sup> Intelligence reports concluded that the British public, far from being bolstered by the message, was inclined to attribute Reynaud’s appeal to the imminence of a French collapse. Indeed, there was reported criticism of vague Churchillian phrases like “we will never surrender” and “we will fight in the streets, on the hills...” Such critiques rested on the belief that material deficiencies in men and equipment had led to the defeat, and that real steps to rectify shortages needed to be taken.<sup>63</sup> While the Dunkirk evacuations had been highly praised, there was still pressure to continually move towards victory. Heroic rhetoric devoid of any strategy or not backed up by visible movement towards this goal was considered cheap and not at all reassuring. This point will be crucial in understanding how British wartime operations were justified in the years to come.

On 15 June Reynaud requested under what conditions the British would be willing to release France from the 28 March agreement not to seek out a separate peace.<sup>64</sup> Within his request he assured Churchill and the War Cabinet that he was certain that the terms would be unacceptable, thus leading to the resumption of the struggle. In this way, the request was contextualised not as a definitive exit from the conflict, but rather, as a way to boost morale in the metropole for a long battle ahead. Reynaud himself was largely in favour of continuing the conflict, if not from within France, then from one of its colonies. Nevertheless, even Reynaud’s successors maintained this line of reasoning largely for public effect. In the flurry of telegrams that followed the French request, the British initially agreed on the condition that the French fleet would proceed immediately to Britain, an addendum that apparently annoyed Reynaud.<sup>65</sup> Shortly after, Campbell was instructed to withdraw the above agreement in exchange for an offer of Franco-British union. However, despite

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<sup>61</sup> Churchill to Reynaud, 14 June 1940, 10GMII/331, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères [Henceforward MAE].

<sup>62</sup> War Cabinet 167 (40) Conclusions, 15 June 1940, CAB 65/7/62, TNA.

<sup>63</sup> “Public Opinion on Present Crisis,” 14 June 1940, INF 1/264, TNA.

<sup>64</sup> W.M. (40) 168<sup>th</sup> Conclusions, Minute 1, Confidential Annex, 16 June 1940, CAB 65/13/45, TNA.

<sup>65</sup> Sir Edward Spears, *Assignment to Catastrophe* (London: Heinemann, 1954), 582.

de Gaulle's enthusiasm and Reynaud's initial positivity upon hearing the news, the French cabinet declined to accept the offer and Reynaud resigned on 16 June. His replacement, Philippe Pétain, the hero of Verdun, requested armistice terms through Spain in the early morning hours of 17 June.

### **“Weather Fine, Paris Surrendered”<sup>66</sup>**

The indecision and uncertainty under which events unfolded following the French request to ascertain armistice terms has been documented in detail in Edward Spears' colourful account, *Assignment to Catastrophe*. In addition to describing the growing belief that France was unlikely to continue the struggle, Spears, who Churchill appointed as Chief Liaison Officer to de Gaulle, documented his own personal disgust for the enemies of the war effort. After catching sight of Pierre Laval at dinner one evening he was so troubled he was unable to finish eating, writing that he was “a revolting sight and he made me feel sick.”<sup>67</sup> Although Spears supported the offer of Franco British Union, it was met with a great deal of scepticism on both sides. Indeed, it is unfair to attribute too much meaning to an offer that was itself hugely symbolic at a point when many rightly believed that French collapse was imminent. Discussions surrounding the offer of union had centred upon making a statement of unity “in a dramatic form” that would impress France enough that they would abandon armistice discussions.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, objections raised at the 16 June War Cabinet meeting were met by Churchill's admission that, although he was initially opposed to the suggestion of union, he believed that “some dramatic announcement was necessary to keep the French going.”<sup>69</sup> Pétain's depiction of the agreement as marriage to a corpse was more in keeping with the broad scepticism on both sides.<sup>70</sup> Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs Paul Baudouin rightly argued that such an agreement would provide no immediate practical relief to France.<sup>71</sup> Cadogan wrote following a 10 a.m. War Cabinet meeting on

<sup>66</sup> Mass Observation Diary 5094, 14 June 1940, MOA.

<sup>67</sup> Spears, *Assignment*, 558-559.

<sup>68</sup> W.M. (40) 167<sup>th</sup> Conclusions, Minute 6 Confidential Annex, 15 June 1940, CAB 65/13/44, TNA.

<sup>69</sup> War Cabinet 169 (40) Conclusions, 16 June 1940, CAB 65/7/64, TNA.

<sup>70</sup> Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy*, 562.

<sup>71</sup> Paul Baudouin, *The Private Diaries of Paul Baudouin*, trans Sir Charles Petrie, BT (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1948), 116.

15 June, "No one seems to be very keen on the idea of Anglo-French union."<sup>72</sup>

The symbolic nature of this gesture is important in that it illustrates the willingness of British policy makers to foster understanding of the conflict as a collaborative effort. The division of France made this effort more difficult, but not impossible.

The failure of this grand gesture shifted the conflict into a new phase in which both sides began to issue a series of statements justifying their individual actions and consolidating public support. French press response was understandably sparse in the metropole. Following the armistice request *Le Temps* published only two editions, one covering 19-21 June and the second 25 June. Imperial publications, however, maintained a regular publication schedule. More importantly, Pétain's broadcasts became a vital source of news within the metropole.<sup>73</sup> Both Pétain and Churchill made radio broadcasts on 17 June following the official request for terms, which had been made early that morning. Pétain, in a well-known radio address at noon that day, told the nation "with a broken heart...fighting must cease."<sup>74</sup> The text of this address and another declaration made by the now Minister for Foreign Affairs Paul Baudouin, were both printed in the Algiers press the following day. The content of Pétain and Baudouin's addresses lead to a number of observations. First, both praised the heroic and noble efforts of the French forces against an enemy that was technologically and numerically superior.<sup>75</sup> Second, Baudouin's address attempted to justify an armistice based on a narrow and very limited definition of nationhood and indeed sovereignty. He concluded that the existence of the French nation meant maintaining "the purity of the French soul" and the "spiritual heritage" of the homeland.<sup>76</sup>

These depictions were illustrative of the disparity that existed between French and British war aims and thus French and British understandings of sovereignty. Or, perhaps it is more appropriate to say, Anglo-French

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<sup>72</sup> Cadogan, *Diaries*, 299.

<sup>73</sup> Pétain's addresses between 1940-1942 can be found in this volume: Philippe Pétain, *Les Paroles et Les Écrits du Maréchal Pétain, 16 Juin 1940-1 Janvier 1942* (Editions de la Légion, 1942).

<sup>74</sup> War Cabinet 170 (40) Conclusions, 17 June 1940, CAB 65/7/65, TNA.

<sup>75</sup> "Le Maréchal Pétain président du Conseil parle à la France," *L'Echo d'Alger*, 18 June 1940, 1. "Poignante déclaration de M. Baudouin," *L'Echo d'Alger*, 18 June 1940, 1.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

*perceptions* and *portrayals* of sovereignty. It would become increasingly clear that the British effort and stated refusal to compromise their own freedom was based on the belief that sovereignty and freedom were tantamount to control over national borders and the land within those borders. Likewise, British criticisms of the Pétain government were based on the claim that it had no real power over internal affairs. Spiritual and cultural remnants meant very little from within the bounds of an aggressive and territorial conflict. The Algiers press dutifully included copies of Churchill's broadcast and publicised the fact that British officials were apparently united in the decision to fight until victory was achieved. Although this decision was taken with careful consideration of material resources and the eventuality of an American declaration of war, Churchill blithely claimed that fighting on was assumed, not discussed: "...we were much too busy to waste time upon such unreal, academic issues."<sup>77</sup> Churchill's rhetoric, both in the midst of and in the aftermath of the conflict, was strikingly similar. His stated certainty that "in the end all will be well," was to form the basis of British rhetoric, which would centre upon the certainty of victory in an honourable struggle.<sup>78</sup> Although some MO diarists were sceptical of Churchill's assuring speech, many writers observed that the public described his oratory as "like a tonic" or greatly soothing.<sup>79</sup> A female writer from North London concluded pithily "the better educated stand these things less well than the simple."<sup>80</sup> Crucially, press reports stated clearly that this tragic news, far from coming as a shock, had been expected and was met with full preparedness.<sup>81</sup> De Gaulle made his initial broadcast via the BBC the following day, calling upon France to continue the struggle. Official declarations from the French metropole described the address as void and his position in London as having no valid links with the French government.<sup>82</sup> In the days to follow, British sources very publically asserted that the armistice request could be a ruse in which the dishonourable nature of the terms would be used to bolster French opinion into continuing the struggle. This possibility led directly to the

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<sup>77</sup> Churchill, *Finest Hour*, 157.

<sup>78</sup> "Faith Still Firm, Mr. Churchill's Address," *The Times*, 18 June 1940, 6.

<sup>79</sup> Mass Observation Diary 5295, 18 June 1940, MOA.

<sup>80</sup> Mass Observation Diary 5388, 25 June 1940, MOA.

<sup>81</sup> Diplomatic Correspondent, "Last Hours in France, Britain Prepared for the News," *The Times*, 18 June 1940, 6.

<sup>82</sup> "Après l'allocution radiodiffusée du général de Gaulle," *Le Temps*, 19-21 June 1940, 3.

suppression of Gaullist broadcasts until 22 June. At the first meeting of the Vansittart Committee on 21 June, which was formed with the goal of coordinating continued French resistance, the committee members<sup>83</sup> agreed that de Gaulle should not be permitted to make any further broadcasts.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, initially, a decision had been made and subsequently reversed to reject de Gaulle's request to broadcast 18 June. This initial rejection was based upon the hope of preserving relations with the current French government.<sup>85</sup> In any case, Churchill's own 'Finest Hour' address made the same day would largely overshadow de Gaulle's speech, which struggled to gain listeners. The confusion of this period belies oversimplified conclusions that British opinion was either shocked by or fully expected the French defeat.

Likewise, it is easy to detect continued confusion on the French side. The sparse press availability gave new value to radio statements. However Pétain and Baudouin made contradictory justifications for requesting terms. Pétain's initial broadcast had been made without the consent of his ministers and confusion as to the likely outcome of the request for terms had prompted an alteration in the text of the speech. Pétain had initially said, "The fighting must cease." When printed, the text was changed to "We must try to cease the fighting."<sup>86</sup> The original text was altered largely to avoid the confusion the statement had caused amongst the armed forces. Pétain made a second address on 20 June in which he announced that plenipotentiaries had been selected to hear the German terms. Likewise, this communication made no mention of the possibility of resuming the struggle. It stated that the dire military situation, again due to the inferiority of French material and quantities of men, made the request inevitable. Going further, it called for a renewed spirit of sacrifice in order to rebuild France.<sup>87</sup> Rebuilding could not take place without first accepting defeat and signing an armistice.

These utterances were at odds with information that was being given to the British and even in some cases to the French public. After meeting with Pétain and Baudouin, First Lord Alexander reported to Churchill that he had

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<sup>83</sup> Members included: Vansittart, Spears, Strang, Morton and Speight.

<sup>84</sup> "Vansittart Committee," 21 June 1940, GB165-0269 Box 1 File 3, Middle East Centre Archive [Henceforward MECA].

<sup>85</sup> War Cabinet 171 (40) Conclusions, 17 June 1940, CAB 65/7/66, TNA.

<sup>86</sup> Griffiths, Marshal Pétain, 240.

<sup>87</sup> Pétain, *Paroles*, 13-14.

received verbal assurances that the French would not accept dishonourable terms as well as the impression that the struggle was likely to be resumed. Baudouin's 17 June broadcast argued in a similar vein, asserting that the current situation faced by the armed forces made it necessary to inquire as to the intentions of Germany before considering final defensive measures.<sup>88</sup> His use of national rhetoric consolidated imagery that depicted the long and proud history of the French nation state, thus linking the idea of national existence with the decision to request terms.<sup>89</sup> However, despite the influx of telegrams arriving in Bordeaux from French North Africa and the Levant promising continued assistance and urging officials to renew the struggle, Pétain and his new cabinet refused to commit to an evacuation plan. Alexander expressed disdain for Pétain and distrust over his intentions, finding him to be "obviously very old and finding it difficult to connect."<sup>90</sup> Pétain's addresses, which would focus on explaining the defeat and criticising the moral decay that had been rampant in the interwar years cast a long shadow on the idea of further resistance, even if the French Cabinet remained divided. Nevertheless, British policy was carried out under the assumption that continued resistance was still *possible*.

This uncertainty had clear effects on official rhetoric, most notably in the British suppression of further broadcasts by de Gaulle. Additionally, the press increased speculations over the possibility that the armistice terms would be rejected. These speculations were the beginning of the separation of the mass of the French public from the Pétain government. Initial reactions in the press focussed upon British resolve to continue the struggle and avoided criticising the French. It is important to distinguish between two different expectations in response to the French request. First, as mentioned above, there was little surprise expressed either in official rhetoric or public sentiment over this outcome. Second, the armistice request was not interpreted as a definitive exit from the struggle. Intelligence reports depicted public sentiment as one of

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<sup>88</sup> Speech Broadcast by Baudouin, 18 June 1940, FO 371/24348, TNA.

<sup>89</sup> Baudouin, *Diaries*, 120. Most notably: "More than at any time in the national history, this mingling of our sufferings and of our determinations assures the maintenance of the nobility and of the purity of the civilization of France."

<sup>90</sup> "Note prepared of interviews at Bordeaux," 19 June 1940, PREM 3/174/4, TNA.



“confusion and shock, but hardly surprise.”<sup>91</sup> First Sea Lord Dudley Pound assumed that the armistice terms would be invalidated by a request to surrender the French fleet, leading to the termination of the conference and resumption in fighting.<sup>92</sup> By 20 June the British press was asserting that opposition to surrender was growing among the French population, a claim that was increasingly at odds with Pétain’s own explanations of the reasons for defeat. An article in *The Guardian* accused the Pétain government of suppressing the publication of favourable news such as increases in war material being supplied by the U.S.<sup>93</sup> As late as 21 June Foreign Minister Lord Halifax reported a meeting with French Ambassador Charles Corbin at which the latter had suggested that public opinion in France was gaining strength to continue the fight.<sup>94</sup>

However, Pétain’s own 20 June broadcast explained the reason for the defeat as “too few children, too few arms, too few allies.”<sup>95</sup> His addresses provided little scope for continuing the struggle. His claims, that material shortage was the cause of the French withdrawal, attempted to justify a strategic military decision encompassed within broader arguments of interwar decadence. Victory in 1918, Pétain argued, led to a nation in which “the spirit of pleasure has prevailed over the spirit of sacrifice.”<sup>96</sup> Already, criticisms were beginning to surface surrounding Pétain’s perceived defeatism. *The Times* published a critique of the address, arguing that Pétain, in a speech “calculated to take the heart out of the French people,” attempted to justify the request for an armistice.<sup>97</sup> Attempts to explain the armistice request in terms of both material and moral shortages would become increasingly difficult to maintain, particularly in light of repeated promises not to agree to a dishonourable peace. On the British side, it was becoming apparent that separating the French as a nation from their leadership would allow for the perpetuation of the alliance, albeit in an altered form. The British became France’s saviour and rehabilitator.

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<sup>91</sup> “Public Opinion on the Present Crisis,” 17 June 1940, INF 1/264, TNA.

<sup>92</sup> Pound to Churchill, 18 June 1940, FO 371/24311, TNA.

<sup>93</sup> “Our London Correspondence: France,” *The Guardian*, 20 June 1940, 4. R. Campbell to Foreign Office, 21 June 1940, FO 371/24311, TNA.

<sup>94</sup> War Cabinet 174 (40) Conclusions, 21 June 1940, CAB 65/7/69, TNA.

<sup>95</sup> “Too Few Children, Too Few Arms, Too Few Allies,” *The Guardian*, 21 June 1940, 7.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> “French Envoys Hear Hitler’s Terms,” *The Times*, 21 June 1940, 6.

Nevertheless, even as British publications persisted in claiming that France might still reject the armistice terms, it was possible to detect a growing tendency to understand the struggle as an exclusively British one. Depictions were focussed upon the defence of fortress Britain rather than the possibility of continued French aid. Corbin reported 21 June that the British press contained little news about France and focussed instead on the British effort and the evolution of American opinion.<sup>98</sup> Although there was little outright criticism of the French between 17-21 June, and indeed a great deal of pity for their current plight, there was a noticeable shift in how the war was understood.<sup>99</sup> Specifically, it was increasingly interpreted as a British war. A South London shopkeeper wrote that the public displayed a “quiet steady confidence: we fight alone.”<sup>100</sup> Resolve attached to these sentiments indicated a growing disinterest for the plight of France. Intelligence reports went as far as warning, “the latency of anti-French feeling must never be forgotten. A few days ago sympathy swamped it but it found indirect expression in a common phrase ‘At last we have no Allies, now we fight alone’.”<sup>101</sup>

Following a humiliating armistice ceremony, conducted at Rehon, General Huntziger signed a Franco-German armistice in the same rail carriage that Foch had presented his own terms to the Germans in 1918. Thus ended speculations of possible continued French resistance from abroad. The days and weeks ahead would see fewer hopes of continued imperial resistance despite earlier assurances. Although the Franco-German armistice was signed on 22 June, it would not go into effect until 25 June at 12:35 a.m., following the negotiation of a separate Franco-Italian agreement. The period following the signature of the armistice, and leading up to the British bombardments of the French fleet in early July, saw continued separation in British rhetoric, which firmly distinguished between the Pétain government and the rest of the French population. This distinction, alongside British representations of themselves as the last bulwark against a breakdown of civilisation, would be key themes in British rhetoric throughout the struggle. These portrayals of France and future justifications of British operations rested on the assumption that France was no

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<sup>98</sup> Corbin to Bordeaux, 21 June 1940, 9GMII/24, MAE.

<sup>99</sup> “Relation sommaire de la situation a Londres du 17 Juin au 20 Juillet,” 10GMII/291, MAE.

<sup>100</sup> Mass Observation Diary 5039.3, 17 June 1940, MOA.

<sup>101</sup> “Public Opinion on the Present Crisis,” 19 June 1940, INF 1/264, TNA.

longer an independent and sovereign nation. On the other hand, Pétain's government would fight directly against such claims, basing its legitimacy and right to rule on the maintenance of its colonial territories and fleet.

### **No Longer a French Government**

British political intelligence summaries expressed nothing but frustration over the events of late June. Pétain was depicted as “a hopelessly broken weed” and his new government was accused of perverting the offer of Franco-British union into “a purely selfish intention to absorb France and her empire into that of Britain.”<sup>102</sup> This period remains important because it illustrates decisive moves on both sides to construct lasting and persuasive arguments about what had happened over the last two months and how the outcomes should be understood. Rhetoric, in other words, was a vital tool used to garner immediate support for two different future plans. Moves to consolidate support included attempts to influence American opinion, either in demonstrations of resolve on the British side or justifications of departure from the conflict on the French side. Although American radio on 23 June reported that France had signed an armistice with Germany the previous day, the event was not broadly confirmed or analysed in the British mass media until 24 June.

Nevertheless, Churchill's own address, made the night of 22/23 June, expressing “grief and amazement” at the decision to accept the armistice terms, formed the basis of French objections. Baudouin expressed his particular displeasure over Churchill's promise to remain true to the cause of the French people in the conflict, despite the actions of their government.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, Churchill's address lay the groundwork for arguments that the Bordeaux government, by agreeing to armistice terms, had not only betrayed the will of its own people, but had forfeited the moral platform that a path of resistance would have provided. Immediately following the armistice request, Franco-British rhetoric shifted dramatically. The themes that emerged during this shift would form the basis of much of the rhetoric espoused throughout the conflict. It was from this point that Pétain began to directly address British statements, which distinguished French opinion from his government. Similarly, 22-23 June was, in British official quarters, believed to be the period during which the British

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<sup>102</sup> Weekly Political Intelligence Summaries, 2 July 1940, FO 371/25235, TNA.

<sup>103</sup> Baudouin, *Diaries*, 138.

public came to the conclusion that the armistice terms would be accepted.<sup>104</sup> British rhetoric from 24 June moved immediately to consolidate support based around two key arguments. First, official statements and responses from the media drove home the idea of British resolve based around depictions of themselves as the lone and morally-superior combatant in the struggle. Second, the Franco-German armistice was dishonourable and indeed unrepresentative. This latter claim led to arguments that the fleet was now virtually in German hands and the Bordeaux government was not representative of the majority of opinion within France and the broader empire.

Although the armistice terms met none of Pétain's criteria for refusal and had been carefully crafted by the Germans to avoid French re-entry into the conflict, British portrayals of the agreement as dishonourable were necessary, particularly from a symbolic point of view. The emergence of de Gaulle as a rival figure of French governance and the voice of the "true" France was at the core of the issue. His 18 June address had already made rival claims on the issue of French sovereignty. Speaking from London he said "I...am conscious of speaking in the home of France."<sup>105</sup> His radio addresses on 22 and 24 June calling on Frenchmen to join him in disowning the Franco-German armistice precipitated a concerned telegram from French *Charge d'Affaires* Roger Cambon. Writing to the Bordeaux government, he expressed his concern that a hostile propaganda war would pit France against Britain.<sup>106</sup> Indeed, French rhetoric worked directly to combat British criticisms and assert the continued sovereignty of the French nation state against British and Gaullist arguments to the contrary.

French analyses of the British political and press response to the signing of the armistice were quick to note that British rhetoric was moving in a new direction. Churchill's aforementioned statement, which directly challenged the legitimacy of the agreement and the current government, argued that acceptance of the terms could not have been made by a government that "possessed freedom, independence and constitutional authority."<sup>107</sup> In a broadcast from Bordeaux on 23 June, Pétain protested in the name of the

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<sup>104</sup> Notes on the Capitulation, June 1940, FO 371/24348, TNA.

<sup>105</sup> Charles de Gaulle, *Discours et Messages Pendant la Guerre Juin 1940-Janvier 1946* (Paris: Plon, 1970), 18 June 1940.

<sup>106</sup> Cambon to Bordeaux, 29 June 1940, 9GMII/295, MAE.

<sup>107</sup> "France is Not Dead," *The Times*, 24 June 1940, 6.

French government against accusations that there was a difference of opinion between the views of the nation and the government that was leading it.<sup>108</sup> He alluded to the renewal of French greatness, which would be achieved through the courage and perseverance of her people. By again referencing the material inferiority of the French war machine, Pétain constructed a broader rationale for the armistice. France had simply been out numbered on every front, and the only logical choice was to relent and begin to rebuild the nation from those new foundations. It was possible, Pétain argued, to create a new and better France even from within vastly altered circumstances. These depictions were fundamentally different to how Britain envisaged the unfolding conflict. De Gaulle's broadcast the same day (and authorised by the War Cabinet) stating his intention to set up a provisional French National Committee in cooperation with the British government, which would express the true will of France, was a direct challenge to the validity of the Bordeaux government.<sup>109</sup> However, the War Cabinet was noticeably reticent toward issuing a statement of unconditional support for de Gaulle, cancelling the initial 23 June plan to do so. The War Cabinet waited for a further five days before issuing a statement that recognised de Gaulle's leadership, and only after being pressured by the Vansittart Committee.<sup>110</sup> Political issues were rapidly shifting to the forefront of British rhetoric, at the centre of which were questions of legitimacy and what constituted and who could speak for the French state. Mass media including the press and BBC referred to the metropolitan government as "the Pétain government," indicating that it did not represent the authentic France.<sup>111</sup>

This depiction was also consistent with analyses of British opinion, which concluded "at all levels of society the opinion is bitterly and vigorously expressed that the French people have been betrayed by 'the politicians'."<sup>112</sup> French official and media responses to British rhetoric claimed that Churchill had acted in bad faith when he criticised the authority of the current government

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<sup>108</sup> French Broadcast from Bordeaux, 23 June 1940, PREM 3/174/4, TNA. Pétain, *Paroles*, 13. "Le Maréchal Pétain Répond à M. Winston Churchill," *Le Temps*, 25 June 1940, 1. Francisque Laurent, "Stupeur Attristée," *L'Echo d'Alger*, 25 June 1940, 1.

<sup>109</sup> De Gaulle was finally recognized individually on 28 June.

<sup>110</sup> "Vansittart Committee," 28 June 1940, GB165-0269 Box 1 File 3, MECA.

<sup>111</sup> "Relation sommaire de la situation a Londres," 17 June-20 July 1940, 10GMII/291, MAE. "Presse anglaise du 23 Juin 1940," 23 June 1940, 10GMII/331, MAE.

<sup>112</sup> "Public Opinion on the Present Crisis," 24 June 1940, INF 1/264, TNA.

in taking a decision that he himself had agreed was necessary before 17 June. *L'Echo d'Alger* published an article entitled "*L'Attitude Anglaise*" laying out the dates that Britain had been told that it was likely that France would have to put down her arms. The first warning was listed as 20 May.<sup>113</sup> Underneath the back and forth of French and British rhetoric lay the deeper issue of legality, made more relevant with the emergence of de Gaulle as a rival voice. Statements broadcast in French and English via the BBC on 23 June argued that not only had Pétain's government broken the 28 March agreement not to conclude a separate armistice, the decision to sign the agreement would remove all agency from the government, thus depriving it of the "right to represent free French citizens."<sup>114</sup> Although subsequent attempts to establish what would become the Vichy government as illegal have been tenuous at best, in 1940 such claims were at the heart of attempts to gain broader public support.<sup>115</sup>

The immediate mobilisation within the War Cabinet to condemn the terms as dishonourable was linked to the claim that the agreement was made under duress and therefore confirmed that France was no longer a free and sovereign nation.<sup>116</sup> At this juncture, although de Gaulle would begin to play a greater role, his calls to Frenchmen urging them to join him in continuing the struggle could hardly be called wildly successful. A week after his 18 June address, only a few hundred individuals had volunteered.<sup>117</sup> Indeed, despite the War Cabinet's decision to allow de Gaulle to broadcast on 23 June, and his representations of France as having been reduced to a state of slavery, few rallied to his call.<sup>118</sup> The armistice terms themselves were described across the British press as wholly dishonourable. *The Times* depicted them as exacting "the complete capitulation of France."<sup>119</sup> Ongoing concern regarding the fleet resurfaced with the publication of terms on 24 June. Under the agreement, "France will be entirely powerless."<sup>120</sup> Cambon wrote to his government

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<sup>113</sup> "L'Attitude Anglaise," *L'Echo d'Alger*, 26 June 1940, 1.

<sup>114</sup> France Libre, Dossier 2, 23 June 1940, AG/3(1)/257, AN.

<sup>115</sup> Jackson, *The Dark Years*, 133-136.

<sup>116</sup> War Cabinet 176 (40) Conclusions, 22 June 1940, CAB 65/7/71, TNA.

<sup>117</sup> Charles de Gaulle, *The Complete War Memoirs of Charles de Gaulle*, vol. 1, *The Call to Honour*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), 88.

<sup>118</sup> "Submission to Slavery: Plea to Frenchmen, General de Gaulle's Broadcast," *The Guardian*, 24 June 1940, 6.

<sup>119</sup> "Hitler's Terms for an Armistice Accepted," *The Times*, 24 June 1940, 6.

<sup>120</sup> "The Terms," *The Guardian*, 24 June 1940, 4.

describing continued publications throughout the British press of material highlighting protests against the armistice within the French Empire.<sup>121</sup> The mobilisation of imagery, particularly French dissent, was used as a way to drive home the legitimacy of British claims.

Diplomatic disputes over the extent to which Britain attempted to convince French colonies to fight alongside Britain and the newly-recognised de Gaulle were an ongoing source of tension. Corbin's complaint to Halifax that de Gaulle should not have been allowed to broadcast on 23 June and his subsequent request that the British declaration in French backing de Gaulle's statement be kept out of the press were symptoms of a deeper crisis based upon two competing sources of Frenchness.<sup>122</sup> Indeed, the Bordeaux government issued a "painful" note of complaint, which, following Corbin's refusal to deliver it, arrived via Cambon. The newly-formed government protested against "the terms used by the Prime minister" as he sought to separate the true public opinion from the actions of Pétain's government.<sup>123</sup> Nowhere was criticism greater than in the British press. *The Times*, in a claim that today seems ironic given American recognition of the Vichy government, claimed that French "independence" was a mockery "realized nowhere more acutely than in the United States."<sup>124</sup> It was generally agreed during this period, however, that relations with the Bordeaux government should not be completely severed even if they remained outwardly strained. Rhetorical condemnations, in other words, did not rule out back door diplomacy. Desmond Dinan has argued that after the Franco-German armistice was signed, "the British government lost all sensitivity to metropolitan French opinion."<sup>125</sup> However, this is inaccurate. While the British government would consistently criticise the Vichy government throughout the war, they were very careful to avoid implicating the broader French population and Pétain, who they knew still commanded a great deal of respect amongst a majority of citizens.

The fact that the terms of the armistice were not published within France until 25 June gave the British a new source of criticism. Following the news that

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<sup>121</sup> Cambon to Bordeaux, "Presse Anglaise," 24 June 1940, 10GMII/331, MAE.

<sup>122</sup> British Statement in French, 23 June 1940, PREM 3/174/3, TNA.

<sup>123</sup> War Cabinet 179 (40) Conclusions, 24 June 1940, CAB 65/7/74, TNA.

<sup>124</sup> "Stricken France," *The Times*, 25 June 1940, 7.

<sup>125</sup> Desmond Dinan, *The Politics of Persuasion: British Policy and French African Neutrality, 1940-42* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 24.

an armistice had been signed with Italy, *The Guardian* stressed the dishonour of the agreement, commenting “the Bordeaux Government, for understandable reasons, has not made known the nature of the German terms to the French people.”<sup>126</sup> The assumption inherent in this statement makes it clear to the reader that only a small group of duplicitous and defeatist men stood in the way of a general population anxious to continue the struggle. More blatant statements regarding the armistice as “a betrayal of the French people” and “the handful of men” who surrendered French honour would emerge at the centre of Anglo-French tensions.<sup>127</sup> The wealth of studies regarding the general chaos following the refugee crisis and immediate relief that met the announcement of a cessation in hostilities belies such sentiments.<sup>128</sup> However, what is clear is that British rhetoric in the aftermath of the armistice request became increasingly judgmental of French decisions, creating a framework that allowed for the separation of the general population from what would become “the men of Vichy.” French observations of the British population concluded that they continued to hold the people of France in high regard and recognised the extent of their suffering.<sup>129</sup> British rhetoric, then, was not just a way to ensure their own population of an eventual victory. It also was a means to preserve links between the larger population of metropolitan France and the ongoing war effort.

In order to discredit the Franco-German and to a lesser extent the Franco-Italian armistice, British arguments focussed upon the inherently untrustworthy nature of both parties. Notably, the Italians were treated more as a circling buzzard or a slightly annoying second cousin, rather than an organic threat. De Gaulle, in his 26 June BBC French address, asked how France was expected “to rise again from beneath the German jack-boot and the Italian dancing-slipper.”<sup>130</sup> The Foreign Office suggested portraying the Italians as

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<sup>126</sup> “The Armistice,” *The Guardian*, 25 June 1940, 4; also Diplomatic Correspondent, “French People in the Dark,” *The Times*, 25 June 1940, 6.

<sup>127</sup> “Former Paris Correspondent, “The Riddle of the French Capitulation: Pétain and the Men Behind Him,” *The Guardian*, 25 June 1940, 4. “Britain and France,” *The Guardian*, 26 June 1940, 4.

<sup>128</sup> Hannah Diamond, *Fleeing Hitler, France 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Jackson, *The Dark Years*. Jackson, *The Fall of France*. Robert O Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard New Order 1940-1944* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).

<sup>129</sup> Cambon to Bordeaux, 25 June 1940, 10GMII/292, MAE.

<sup>130</sup> “De Gaulle to Pétain: Who is Responsible?” *The Guardian*, 27 June 1940, 7.



duplicitous and sneaky in press and public statements. Although the terms appeared to be lenient, Italian intentions were to first demilitarise any zones of interest and then take them completely during peace negotiations.<sup>131</sup> The perceived importance of American opinion and its anticipated participation in the struggle was also a concern on both sides of the channel. A Foreign Office note suggested countering negative French propaganda in the U.S. by arguing that British victory was a certainty. The same note, while emphasising the need not to engage in petty criticisms of French fighting efforts, made the slightly less actionable suggestion of landing “a few tough British marines in France” with the object of killing a few Germans. Such a sensational story, it was believed, could be worth “hours of drawing-room gossip and backstairs chat.”<sup>132</sup> This response was a direct action taken following French publications in the U.S. accusing Britain of failing to mobilise men and resources during the conflict: “It was obvious that Britain had believed more in the blockade than in the provision of material assistance to her Ally.”<sup>133</sup> Importantly, these plans illustrate a conscious effort to shape opinion through rhetoric and heroic, but strategically ineffective, action. What was important was to create the perception that Britain was taking action to defeat the enemy.

Harsh criticism like that which had met the abdication of King Leopold a month earlier was largely absent from depictions of the French armistice. The clear efforts to separate the bulk of the population from their leaders were evidence of the broader desire to maintain positive views of the French population within Britain. The expectation of victory and of a post-war France, which would be rehabilitated as a victor nation, played a key role, particularly in the emotive language of Churchill’s speeches. His address on 25 June in the Commons called for Britain to focus upon the task ahead, leading to the rescue of France “from the ruin and bondage into which she has been cast by the might and fury of the enemy.”<sup>134</sup> The construction of the Anglo-French

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<sup>131</sup> “Italian Armistice Terms to France, Suggested Line for Publicity in Press and Wireless,” 26 June 1940, FO 371/24348, TNA.

<sup>132</sup> Foreign Office note on countering French propaganda in the U.S., 28 June 1940, FO 371/24311, TNA.

<sup>133</sup> War Cabinet 181 (40) Conclusions, 25 June 1940, CAB 65/7/76, TNA.

<sup>134</sup> *Hansard* HC Deb vol. 362 col. 302 (25 June 1940)

[http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/jun/25/war-situation#column\\_302](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/jun/25/war-situation#column_302). Notably at this point in his address an MP interrupted to shout “and by the politicians.”

relationship as one that remained valid, so long as the current government was excluded, was an important assumption of British rhetoric in the following years, and indeed, in the post-war years as well. It was premised on the notion that no matter who claimed to lead the French nation, the legitimate France remained true to the aims and goals of Britain. Pétain's address, also made on 25 June, provides the opportunity to emphasise how each side dealt with and understood the concept of defeat. While Churchill's speech focussed upon the inevitability of victory, Pétain's outlined rational statistics, which made defeat inevitable. In sharp contrast to Churchill's moral tones, Pétain argued "that victory is dependent upon men, material and how they are used."<sup>135</sup>

The French defeat led to a crisis of legitimisation. It is crucial to consider how such sentiments were created not from the ground up, but through a framework of past successes and current understandings of Britain. Later interpretations of wartime sentiment too often make conclusions based upon the knowledge that Allied victory was forthcoming. Peter Mangold writes, "Britain's final advantage over its ally was moral. Unlike France, the crisis of June, 1940, pulled the British together, producing a climate of defiance."<sup>136</sup> However, such observations fail to understand that the moral rhetoric of the British struggle is not equivalent to an objective analysis of "why Britain won." Rather, myths and memories that grew stronger in the aftermath of the war "were as much a consequence as a cause of victory."<sup>137</sup> The shift in representations of the war from an Anglo-French to a British struggle would play a crucial role in June 1940. Roger Cambon reported on the generally firm confidence in Britain, attributing it to ignorance regarding the battle to come and sentiments linked to "la citadelle britannique."<sup>138</sup> Churchill made references to Britain as an impenetrable island fortress in the immediate aftermath of the armistice request. His address on 17 June referred to the upcoming battle as a "world cause," whose next battle would be the defence of "our island home."<sup>139</sup> Likewise, Duff Cooper's 19 June BBC broadcast drove home the advantages of

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<sup>135</sup> Pétain, *Paroles*, 16.

<sup>136</sup> Peter Mangold, *Britain and the Defeated French: From Occupation to Liberation, 1940-1944* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 7.

<sup>137</sup> Jackson, *The Dark Years*, 113.

<sup>138</sup> Cambon to Bordeaux, 30 June 1940, 10GMII/296, MAE.

<sup>139</sup> Robert Rhodes James, ed., *Winston S. Churchill His Complete Speeches 1897-1963*, vol. 6, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1974), 6231 "Mr. Churchill's Message," *The Times*, 17 June 1940, 6.

this new phase of the conflict. “We are nearly all inside the fortress now – the fortress is well defended and well supplied and will hold out until the efforts of the enemy are exhausted.”<sup>140</sup> Heroic statements and assumptions of a victorious outcome, apparently through defensive efforts alone, were at the core of British rhetoric in the aftermath of the French defeat and throughout the war years. Ernest Bevin’s overseas broadcast on 23 June bestowed the upcoming battle with all of the trappings of historical greatness and triumph. At this “critical moment in world history” the Commonwealth would stand between “tyranny and liberty” and will ultimately triumph.<sup>141</sup> The necessity of resistance was constructed upon the premise that being on the “right” side was a precursor for and an assurance of victory.

Two related points of clarification should be made at this point. First, as John Darwin has pointed out, “The Fall of France opened the decisive phase of Britain’s imperial crisis.”<sup>142</sup> Defending metropolitan Britain from what was thought to be imminent invasion was undoubtedly a top priority. However, the war that Britain now faced was an imperial war. Egypt and the Suez Canal were now under direct Italian threat and British eastern territories including Malaya and Singapore stared down the barrel of Japanese encroachment. Second, there was a strong tradition of securing Commonwealth support from wealthy, westernised and anglophilic countries including Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, giving Britain access to essential resources. The support provided by these nations as well as India (between May-November 1940 the Indian army doubled in size)<sup>143</sup> in material and manpower were vital considerations that allowed Britain to continue pursuing the struggle against the Axis powers.

In the weeks following the French withdrawal, the massively under sourced and under informed British security service, or MI5, struggled both to learn more about the enemy it was facing and deal with the thousands of reports of suspected enemy infiltration.<sup>144</sup> At the same time, military concerns, most notably the subject of the fleet, remained topics of great importance in

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<sup>140</sup> BBC News Broadcast on French Defeat, 19 June 1940, DUFC 8/2/17, CA.

<sup>141</sup> Overseas Transmission IV, 23 June, 1940, BEVN II 1/1, CA.

<sup>142</sup> John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 499.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 505.

<sup>144</sup> Calder Walton, *Empire of Secrets: British Intelligence, the Cold War and the Twilight of Empire* (London: William Collins, 2014), 32-33.

parliamentary circles. The significance of the fleet and the belief that Germany would simply seize it for use against Britain had already been a topic of conversation within the press. Once the terms of the armistice had been published, the offending article - which called for all French ships to return to their peacetime ports for demobilisation - was cited as another sign of German deceit and held up against all of the broken promises made in the past. As early as 24 June, ships in Oran were being kept under close watch "in case it might be necessary to take drastic action against them."<sup>145</sup> Churchill's 25 June Commons address, while refusing to speculate on the fate of the fleet, nevertheless portrayed his concern regarding the current state of affairs.<sup>146</sup> A closer study of the rising issue of the French fleet will be made in the following two chapters. However, at this point it must be stressed that questions of the fleet and empire were rapidly becoming central to both British policy and rhetoric. Likewise, they were beginning to form the basis of French claims of sovereignty.

## Conclusion

The progression of the Anglo-French relationship between the Dunkirk evacuations in late May and the armistice coming into effect on 25 June illustrates how an alliance was reframed to reflect two vastly different policies. It was also the beginning of a triangular rivalry between British, Vichy and Gaullist forces. By examining the progression of sentiment during this period, it becomes evident that the initial alliance was both complex and at times highly uncertain. At the outbreak of war, it appeared as though both sides were mobilising resources for close cooperation. However, Germany's swift progress unleashed chaos in the Low Countries and throughout France. Between 15-20 June an estimated 6-8 million refugees flooded French roads and panicked officials deserted their posts.<sup>147</sup> The possibility of a French collapse was considered not only within the political sphere but also among the broader public. Likewise, frays in the relationship were evident behind closed doors in

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<sup>145</sup> W.M. (40) 178<sup>th</sup> Conclusions, Minute 6, Confidential Annex, 24 June 1940, CAB 65/13/48, TNA.

<sup>146</sup> "Mr. Churchill on the Fate of France," *The Times*, 26 June 1940, 6. *Hansard* HC Deb vol. 362 col. 302 (25 June 1940) [http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/jun/25/war-situation#column\\_302](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/jun/25/war-situation#column_302).

<sup>147</sup> Blatt, "Introduction," 2.

late May and early June. Even so, the frustrations expressed by French officials were deliberately kept out of the press in order to avoid damaging the public's perception of the partnership and the broader conflict. Although British official rhetoric made no blatant speculations on the possibility of defeat, increasing references to the intention to continue the struggle *no matter what happened* resonated with the British public in a similar manner. "No matter what" became an early metaphor for French defeat. Public responses to the armistice were undoubtedly emotionally loaded; however, it is hard to argue that total shock was a statistically significant response.

This chapter establishes a framework for understanding how common themes and approaches became mainstays of the Anglo-French relationship over the next five years. The French decision to request an armistice on 17 June set in motion first a tentative and then an increasingly rapid shift in the rhetoric of both sides. Uncertainty in the initial days after the request led to some hope, however small, that the French would continue the struggle from abroad after rejecting the armistice terms as dishonourable. Indeed, British rhetoric during this period made it clear that Germany was incapable of honourable acts, making any agreement unacceptable. The benefits of de Gaulle's presence in Britain at this point were unconfirmed, as British officials sought to balance their relations with the current Bordeaux government and consolidate support within the broader French Empire. When the Franco-German armistice was signed on 22 June, both sides moved rapidly to consolidate their positions with their own publics as well as important neutral territories, most notably the United States. Attempts to frame or justify decisions as an inevitable outcome of Germany's mechanised assault coupled with the rotten decadence of interwar France were at the core of Pétain's addresses. While British sources tended to agree that mechanical superiority had been the downfall of the Allied effort, criticism was levelled at the new government. British rhetoric laid the foundations for depictions of the leadership of metropolitan France throughout the war. Competing claims of legitimacy and national sovereignty were at the heart of the issue. Most notably, these constructs were based upon the argument that the Bordeaux government did not represent the majority of opinion within the French public, who were allegedly eager to continue the struggle. This approach made it possible for Britain to exonerate

the larger bulk of the population and simultaneously support de Gaulle as the purportedly true voice of France.

In the weeks following the armistice agreement, Pétain and Churchill would engage in a rhetorical battle as each attempted to establish foundations upon which to end or continue a war. As Churchill challenged the sovereignty of France, Pétain consolidated his own legitimacy and embarked upon a road which he hoped would lead to the renewal of France. Political communiqués issued by Baudouin emphasised that France was now a neutral territory and would act without prejudice to maintain this status.<sup>148</sup> It was at this juncture that heroic British rhetoric describing victory as both inevitable and just begun to take shape. The Allied conflict became an exclusively British conflict (leading to French rescue), as did positive memories of the Dunkirk evacuations. Churchill's frequent references to "German thoroughness" as no match for "British pluck" are another example of how retrospective and historically-grounded assumptions can carry on masquerading as logical argument.<sup>149</sup> By the end of 1940, the spectre of the long war ahead and the prospect of the gloomy winter months had dampened the mood of the British public. However, concerted efforts on the part of the MOI to find the ideal "psychological moment" to make public announcements were indicative of the continued belief in the power of communication.<sup>150</sup> This conviction regarding the impact that rhetoric could make was an echo of earlier, pre-war preparations. The months following the armistice would see continued uncertainty, particularly surrounding the Anglo-Vichy relationship. This was accompanied by the knowledge that, ultimately, the conflict had shifted dramatically. The following chapters will track these shifts, as they increasingly resulted in violent Anglo-French clashes, both military and rhetorical. Beneath attempts to explain, condemn, or justify foreign policy, each side would rely upon the framework that they built up in the days after the armistice, mobilising competing ideas of sovereignty, legitimacy, and the moral stance of their respective paths.

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<sup>148</sup> Baudouin, *Diaries*, 145.

<sup>149</sup> Churchill, *Finest Hour*, 322.

<sup>150</sup> "Addendum to Duty Room Report on Home Morale," December 1940, HO 262/12, TNA.

### Chapter 3: “The Real Question at Issue” British Policy Formulation and the French Fleet

#### Introduction

“In the fullest harmony with the Dominions we are moving through a period of extreme danger and of splendid hope when every virtue of our race will be tested and all that we have and are will be freely staked.”<sup>1</sup> Churchill’s words, published in *The Times* on 5 July 1940, resounded in the aftermath of the British bombardment of the French fleet at the Algerian port of Mers el-Kébir, codenamed operation Catapult. They justified what was portrayed as a “necessary tragedy” carried out against an erstwhile ally. The starkly violent nature of the event was utterly suppressed within British official explanations and within the domestic press more broadly. Instead, Churchill linked the emotive yet vague concepts of ‘danger’ and ‘hope’ with the idea that the natural superiority of the British, both as a fighting force and a moral element, would eventually triumph. Thus, he effectively camouflaged the brutality of the bombardment, substituting instead celebratory imagery promising the continuing and ultimately successful prosecution of the war.

The clashes that took place on 3 July 1940 between the British and French at Mers el-Kébir have been subject to a series of interpretations on both sides of the channel. Early analyses of these events on the British side tended to vindicate the action based upon the argument of “unfortunate necessity” - the British simply could not risk the possibility of the French fleet falling into German or Italian hands. From the French perspective, the operations have more often been interpreted as a betrayal of the Anglo-French alliance and evidence of underlying British self interest and historic perfidy. This latter perspective formed the crux of Jacques Costagliola’s argument in which the French were ultimately dual victims of both German and British determination to win the war with little cognizance or moral concern for the collateral damage sustained by France.

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<sup>1</sup> ““Period of Splendid Hope” Mr Churchill on Our Island Strength French Warships in British Hands,” *The Times*, 5 July 1940, 2.

The Germans were willing to leave to us our ships, however, they demanded that they return from Britain. On 3 July, they posed an ultimatum: return them to their ports or the armistice will be void. On the same day, Catapult put everything into question, in Britain, at Oran, at Alexandria. The Franco-British war began loudly.<sup>2</sup>

As more archival materials were being released in the 1970s, Anglophone scholarship began to take a more balanced perspective, although still justifying the basis upon which policy towards the fleet had been carried out. Writing on Darlan's early policies, Robert Melka argued that the strategic importance of the fleet was not at issue. However, he affirms that Darlan never considered handing the fleet over to Germany, nor did Hitler consider, prior to the Torch operations in 1942, taking it by force.<sup>3</sup> In any case, the ultimate scuttling of the French Fleet at Toulon in 1942 was proof of the validity of the French promise. Arthur Marder's 1974 work, *From the Dardanelles to Oran*, argued, similarly, that although Britain had miscalculated about both German and Italian intentions and capabilities, this mattered little in the ultimate decision, because Britain simply could not trust either party to keep its word.<sup>4</sup> His analysis took a more pragmatic view of events, rather than intending to place blame upon one of the actors. It also framed the context of the decision-making process in a more realistic manner, taking into account relevant limiting factors such as trust and uncertainty, which would have affected the perception of available options.

Still, the topic of the French fleet and British policy towards it continues to generate interest. Philip Lasterle has pinpointed Churchill as essentially the driving force behind the policy making process, all other actors being only reluctant and guilt-ridden bystanders. His focus upon Churchill and French Admiral at Mers el-Kébir Marcel-Bruno Gensoul obscures the wider context and complexities of the decision-making process, as he sets out to determine to what extent Mers el-Kébir was "avoidable."<sup>5</sup> This interpretation is far too narrow

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Costagliola, *La Guerre Anglo-Francaise 3 Juillet 1940-11 Novembre 1942: Un Conflit Parallèle et Tangent à la Seconde Guerre Mondiale* (Coulommiers: Daulpha, 2005), 38.

<sup>3</sup> Robert L. Melka, "Darlan between Britain and Germany 1940-41," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 8 No. 2, (1973): 58.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Marder, *From the Dardanelles to Oran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 288.

<sup>5</sup> Philippe Lasterle, "Could Admiral Gensoul Have Averted the Tragedy of Mers el-Kébir?," *The Journal of Military History* 67, no. 3 (2003): 836.



in its focus. Moreover, comparing the destruction at Mers el-Kébir to the more favourable outcome at Alexandria fails to account for the complexities inherent in the policy towards the Vichy French navy and its early distinction between the circumstances at each port. These differences led policy makers to the early conclusion that hostile action was acceptable at Mers el-Kébir, but not at Alexandria or Algiers, where civilian casualties as well as the destruction of British installations would have been too damaging. This was a point that John Colville, Private Secretary to Churchill emphasised in his introduction to Warren Tute's book, *The Deadly Stroke*: "The War Cabinet reached the only possible conclusion. The ships at Plymouth, Portsmouth and Alexandria presented no insuperable difficulty... but a wide range of options must be offered to Admiral Gensoul at Oran."<sup>6</sup> Hervé Coutau-Bégarie and Claude Huan make a valid and valuable point in their assertion that militaristically, the British course of action was sound.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, from a material point of view, it was one of the few feasible options given Britain's limited resources. The following two chapters suggest that equally importantly, the public display of decisive action against the fleet carried a great deal of symbolic power. This was an act calculated to demonstrate British resolve in the on-going conflict.

The analysis that follows is distinct from previous studies because it focuses on the extent to which military capability, perceptions of strategic imperatives, and anticipated public reactions to such an operation were thought likely to impact upon the *prestige* and *credibility* of the British war effort. Imagery and memories from this event rapidly became a barometer for measuring the state of Anglo-Vichy relations throughout the conflict and they resurfaced during future clashes at Dakar and in the Levant. The allocation of two chapters to Catapult is essential in order to fully understand the nuances of the decision making process, making plain how policy makers anticipated particular public responses both from metropolitan publics and from populations abroad immediately following the collapse of the French war effort. Furthermore, the policy process emphasised from the beginning the importance of achieving public support for these actions, and included active plans to foster this backing. In other words, the policy making process, the actual bombardments, and the

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<sup>6</sup> Warren Tute, *The Deadly Stroke*, (London: Collins, 1973), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Hervé Coutau-Bégarie and Claude Huan, *Mers el-Kébir (1940) La Rupture Franco-Britannique* (Paris: Economica, 1994), 108.

retorical discussion and interpretation of the outcome were factors that were both intimately linked and co-determined. British thinking about the French fleet encompassed consideration of its military capability, but also careful analysis of how a possible neutralisation of it might be justified. Herein lies the link between the policy making that took place behind closed doors and the subsequent dissemination of that much-refined policy into the public sphere(s), where it would be discussed and justified by analysis of the official rhetoric produced. Policy making during this period betrayed an early preoccupation with the eventuality of translating policy into convincing press releases and public statements, which mobilised heroic rhetoric confirming British superiority and the certainty of eventual victory.

The scope of this first section will encompass the initial discussion surrounding the importance of the French fleet to British interests, the decision to take action against the fleet, and the refinement of that policy. There was a consensus both within the War Cabinet and the Service Ministries that something should be done to safeguard France's fleet for the Allied cause. However, this sentiment was modified to take account of the underlying but crucial need to justify any British action taken in a manner that would preserve British moral superiority, while also remaining in sympathy with the abiding pro-French sentiment among the British public as a whole. Such beliefs would shape the ways in which Catapult was coordinated, imposing tangible constraints on the operation more broadly, especially in relation to the use of force. British strategic planners thus acknowledged that garnering public support both at a local and global level were vital, if intangible aspects of the broader conflict.

### **Early Planning and the Significance of the French Fleet**

The French fleet and naval affairs more generally played a crucial role in both French and British perceptions of themselves and of one another throughout the Second World War. This was particularly true immediately after the French collapse. An internal French message cited the fleet as "one of the essential elements of our international situation."<sup>8</sup> For metropolitan France, the fleet was a symbol of prestige, power and legitimacy, the protector of the empire, and a

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<sup>8</sup> Brown, *The Road to Oran*, xxix.

hypothetical bargaining chip with the Axis powers.<sup>9</sup> The French navy was indeed a powerful force. It was the most modernised and least demoralised of all the French armed services. This was a result of the huge sums of money invested in it between 1922 and 1940 and the fact that in June it remained undefeated.<sup>10</sup> Its importance, as second in size only to the British fleet, was a source of strategic concern throughout the British policy making process. To London and the Admiralty, it represented a dangerous liability while its neutralisation would send a powerful message of British power. On 23 June King George VI sent a message to French president Albert Lebrun. In it, he expressed his concern over the safety of the French fleet.<sup>11</sup> Messages such as this one quickly became a source of great annoyance to the French. The Americans, a report from the French Foreign Ministry complained, were just as paranoid and pushy as the British. President Roosevelt had also written, on 16 June, recommending that the French fleet be sent to British ports as soon as possible.<sup>12</sup>

Even before the Franco-German and Franco-Italian armistices went into effect on 25 June, the British were considering how to approach the French fleet. In particular, the fate of two modern battleships, *Dunkerque* and *Strasbourg*, was quickly becoming a source of significant anxiety. They were first mentioned on 15 June in a message from First Sea Lord Dudley Pound to admirals Andrew Cunningham and Dudley North. This note, authorised by Churchill, suggested using gun and torpedo fire to destroy the ships in question if they were in immediate danger of falling into the hands of the enemy.<sup>13</sup> At a meeting between Churchill, Pound and First Lord of the Admiralty V.A. Alexander on 17 June, there was a general discussion regarding “the disposal of the French Fleet which would arise in certain eventualities.”<sup>14</sup> The fleet was undoubtedly important, as we can see here, for strategic reasons. The War Cabinet considered taking action as early as 22 June to secure Oran as an

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<sup>9</sup> P.M.H. Bell, *A Certain Eventuality* (Scotland: Saxon House, 1974), 38.

<sup>10</sup> Chalmers Hood, *Royal Republicans: The French Naval Dynasties Between the World War* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 142.

<sup>11</sup> King George VI to Lebrun, 23 June 1940, 10GMII/334, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, [Henceforward MAE].

<sup>12</sup> Roosevelt to Lebrun, 16 June 1940, 10GMII/334, MAE.

<sup>13</sup> David Brown, *The Road to Oran: Anglo-French Naval Relations September 1939-July 1940* (New York: Frank Cass, 2004), 36.

<sup>14</sup> Report of a meeting with Churchill, 1<sup>st</sup> S.L. (Pound) and V.C.N.S., 17 June 1940, AVAR 5/4/26, Churchill Archive Centre, [Henceforward CA].

alternative British naval base to Gibraltar.<sup>15</sup> Admiral James Somerville, who led Force H, which was stationed at Gibraltar, expressed concern, writing on 24 June in his pocket diary, “news about French Fleet not so good.”<sup>16</sup> Alexander Cadogan, Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, highlighted the extent to which questions regarding the fleet consumed policy makers in the wake of the collapse. Writing on 24 June he reflected on the three Cabinet meetings that had taken place that day. The majority of the time was spent “discussing the awful problem of the French Fleet.”<sup>17</sup>

On 26 June the general conclusion reached by the War Cabinet (Churchill himself was absent from this discussion) was that there was little hope of further French resistance in North Africa or continued naval participation.<sup>18</sup> This realisation prompted cabinet members more seriously to consider possible solutions to neutralise the fleet. In fact, steps had already been taken to secure the key French ship *Richelieu* and take it to a British port for *at least* the duration of the war. This move was to be explained to the Captain of the *Richelieu* as stemming not from British scepticism of Admiral Darlan’s promises, but, rather, a rational inability to depend upon the word of Germany or Italy.<sup>19</sup> At the same meeting Pound reported upon the situation at Oran. The admiralty was worried that *Dunkerque* and *Strasbourg* would depart for a French or Italian port on the north coast of the Mediterranean and had stationed two British submarines outside of the port to stop any movement. Further discussion within the Cabinet centred upon whether the submarines should engage exclusively in surveillance of the ships, or if they should “take action against them.”<sup>20</sup> Although officials did not reach a decision on this question immediately, their discussions were part of a broader sentiment, which recognised the importance of the French fleet and the understanding that violence was a defensible means to secure its nonparticipation in the on going conflict.

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<sup>15</sup> “Implications of Securing Oran as an Alternative Base to Gibraltar,” 22 June 1940, CAB 84/15, The National Archives, [Henceforward TNA].

<sup>16</sup> Somerville’s Pocket Diary, 1940, 24 June 1940, SMVL 1/31, CA.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Cadogan, *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938-1945*, ed. David Dilks (London: Cassell, 1971), 306.

<sup>18</sup> War Cabinet 183 (40) Conclusions, June 26, 1940 11.30am, CAB 65/7/78, TNA.

<sup>19</sup> W.M.(40) 183<sup>rd</sup> Conclusions, Minute 5, Confidential Annex, 26 June 1940 11.30, CAB 65/13/52, TNA.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

On the British side, this sense of uneasiness surrounding the French fleet was based on a number of factors. We have seen that as a military asset, the fleet was certainly of great value. Pound estimated that the Germans would be able to achieve full operational capabilities of the fleet in only 2-3 months.<sup>21</sup> The contemporary accuracy of this statement matters less than its perceived accuracy in 1940. Admiral Darlan's repeated promises that the fleet would in no circumstances be allowed to fall into German hands were of little value to the British. War Cabinet discussions confirmed the opinion that the French would not be able to honour this promise while under the German thumb. More importantly, Germany was unlikely to uphold any agreement of non-interference. However, a third issue also impacted considerations towards the fleet: the necessity of demonstrating on a local and global level Britain's strength and resolve in continuing the war effort. In the final analysis, the decision to "take action" against the fleet was not synonymous with its destruction. Rather, its neutralisation on British terms would make it unavailable to the Axis powers while simultaneously showcasing British power. This thinking will be crucial in understanding how and why British policy towards the fleet was discussed and agreed upon over the next week. The following section will examine this idea in more detail. Namely, it will suggest that policy makers operated under two main assumptions. First, some elements of the French fleet were strategically more important than others. This assertion has already been touched upon in the early discussions surrounding the fate of *Dunkerque* and *Strasbourg*. Second, the symbolic importance of taking confident and decisive action against the fleet played a significant role in how Catapult was planned. This argument will be especially evident in the attention that policy makers paid towards avoiding action that would lead to civilian casualties. Alternatively, they were anxious to endorse action that would meet the approval of American opinion.

### **Formulating Catapult and the American Factor**

Philip Lasterle has pinpointed 27 June as the day that Churchill "imposed" his solution regarding the French fleet upon the Cabinet:

The continuing deterioration of Franco-British diplomatic and naval relations contributed to a climate of "deep mistrust of France," which

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<sup>21</sup> Brown, *Road to Oran*, xxxvi.

led even the most reluctant ministers, tired of resisting, to accept the option by which Churchill hoped to kill two birds with one stone: preclude the Kriegsmarine from running off with the flower of the French Navy and solidify his authority as war leader in the country.<sup>22</sup>

This was also the date that Somerville received notification that he would be commanding Force H in securing “the transfer, surrender or destruction of the French warships at Oran and Mers el Kébir, so as to ensure that these ships could not fall into German or Italian hands.”<sup>23</sup>

Arguing that Churchill pressured his cabinet to ratify hostile action against the French navy, however, is an oversimplification of the decision-making process that surrounded the Catapult operations. It also ignores the broader symbolic value of the operation as a resolution to successfully prosecute the war and signal to the Americans that Britain was indeed a safe investment. As we saw in the previous section, there was general consensus between Churchill, his Cabinet, and the Admiralty that action should be taken to “neutralise” the fleet, or strategic ships within it in order to safeguard the war effort and better prepare for the defence of Britain.<sup>24</sup> This point was reiterated at the 27 June War Cabinet meeting as members noted, “The real question at issue was what to do as regards the French ships at Oran.”<sup>25</sup>

At this point, Churchill presented three options. First, the ships could immediately be mined with magnetic mines. Second a British naval contingent could give those ships a number of alternatives including demilitarisation under British control, transfer to British ports, or to be sunk in three hours. Last, was the possibility of posting two submarines outside Oran, which would sink the ships if they attempted to leave.<sup>26</sup> The use of destructive force remained throughout the operation a last resort, although a possibility nonetheless. The 27 June Cabinet meeting was crucial for two reasons. First, as discussed above, it made very clear that the ships currently berthed at Oran, specifically, the military port of Mers el-Kébir, were of crucial importance to British interests. Although the possibility of combining operations at Oran with others in the Mediterranean

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<sup>22</sup> Lasterle, “Admiral Gensoul,” 839.

<sup>23</sup> “Admiral Somerville’s Official Report,” 26 July 1940, ADM 199/826, TNA.

<sup>24</sup> Lasterle, “Admiral Gensoul,” 838. Marder, *Dardanelles to Oran*, 198.

<sup>25</sup> WM (40) 184<sup>th</sup> Conclusions, Minute 5, Confidential Annex, 27 June 1940, 12 noon, CAB 65/13/53, TNA.

<sup>26</sup> WM (40) 184<sup>th</sup> Conclusions, Minute 5, Confidential Annex, 27 June 1940, 12 noon, CAB 65/13/53, TNA.

or with attempts to secure the *Richelieu* and *Jean Bart*, was mentioned, plans for Oran continued to take priority.

The second part of the meeting addressed British public opinion surrounding the French fleet. This discussion made it clear that policy makers were considering and taking measures to try to influence how wartime operations were likely to be received by members of the public.

In discussion, the view was expressed that it was most important to take action to ensure that the French Fleet could not be used against us. Public opinion was strongly insistent that we should take action on the lines of the measures taken at Copenhagen against the Danish Fleet. In this connection, however, references which were now appearing in the Press, as to measures which might be taken against the French Fleet, were greatly to be deprecated, and instructions should be sent to ensure that this matter was not discussed in the Press.<sup>27</sup>

The War Cabinet simultaneously agreed that action should be taken against the fleet and that public opinion was already both receptive to and actively advocating for this approach. Analyses of the British press sent to Vichy by Roger Cambon, the French *Charge d'Affaires* in London, concluded that confidence in Britain remained relatively strong after events in France. The population was focused largely on the battle ahead and the possibility of German invasion.<sup>28</sup> A decisive solution to the uncertain future of the French fleet would further bolster public confidence. Having noted that much of the British population was likely to approve of operations against the fleet, the War Cabinet agreed that it would be best if any hypothetical operation were not discussed in the press. Members decided that the press should be told, "discussion of such measures might have an unfavourable reaction in French circles which we hoped to rally to our side."<sup>29</sup> Certainly, at this juncture, attempts to bolster the image of General Charles de Gaulle as an alternative to Pétain's government had had little effect. Cunningham, the Commander in Chief of the Mediterranean fleet, would write to Pound in regards to de Gaulle, "No one has any opinion of him."<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, London

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Telegram, Cambon to Vichy, 30 June 1940, 10GMII/296, MAE.

<sup>29</sup> WM (40) 184<sup>th</sup> Conclusions, Minute 5, Confidential Annex, 27 June 1940, 12 noon, CAB 65/13/53, TNA.

<sup>30</sup> Simpson, *Cunningham Papers*, 82.

was also motivated to quash any speculation in the press. Doing so would give them a clean slate upon which to provide their own explanations for how and why operations had been carried out. The War Cabinet also agreed to move forward with preparations for an ultimatum. Pound and Alexander received instructions to begin arranging for an operation of this type at once.<sup>31</sup>

Over the next few days, the Cabinet commissioned a number of investigative studies, their goal being to understand how operations against the French fleet were likely to affect a number of stakeholders. These reports shed light on the role that Catapult would play both on a strategic and symbolic level. On 29 June Churchill requested a memorandum analysing the “Implications of Policy Contemplated in Respect of the French Navy.”<sup>32</sup> An initial report, compiled by the Cabinet’s Joint Planning Sub Committee (JPSC) reached several conclusions. The first concerned the American reaction. It suggested that American good opinion of the British would increase in response to the proposed action and that as a result of the Franco-German armistice American opinion was at present favourable towards the British at the expense of the French.<sup>33</sup> This belief was echoed in Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax’s report. Drawing on information provided by the American Undersecretary of State, he suggested “In the view of the American Government, the surrender of the French Fleet was the most degrading surrender in history.... It seemed safe to assume that any action which we might take in respect of the French Fleet would be applauded in the United States.”<sup>34</sup> American approval was and would continue be a frequent consideration in British wartime policy. Roosevelt’s likely endorsement of Catapult would be reiterated in a War Cabinet meeting on 3 July.<sup>35</sup> However, the JPSC report concluded with a warning: French hostility following British action against the fleet, although not certain, would be harmful if it were to transpire.

At the worst the French re-actions might be extremely serious and would then immensely complicate the already heavy task. If, therefore, there is a genuine danger that the action proposed would lead to the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> “Implications of Action Contemplated in Respect of Certain French Ships,” 29 June 1940, CAB 84/15, TNA.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> WM (40) 187<sup>th</sup> Conclusions Minute 8, Confidential Annex, 29 June 1940 10am, CAB 65/13/55, TNA.

<sup>35</sup> Conclusions, Minute 5 Confidential Annex, 3 July 1940, CAB 65/14/3, TNA.



active hostility of France and of her colonial possessions, we do not consider that the destruction of these French ships by force would be justified.<sup>36</sup>

However, the Chiefs of Staff (COS) did not believe that a French declaration of war was likely. Of course, they were correct. Their estimations were based upon the belief that there were strong strands of defeatism in both metropolitan and colonial France and thus a high unlikelihood that French officials would be able to raise a force of any significance against the British.<sup>37</sup> More importantly, the plans that were being negotiated within the War Cabinet continued to look specifically towards the principle ships at Mers el-Kébir and the use of violent measures against them. The installations and proximity to civilian enclaves of Algiers and Alexandria largely ruled out the use of naval bombardment and made the operations at Mers el-Kébir highly unique.

On 30 June the War Cabinet COS Committee compiled a final report, which took into consideration the recommendations that had been discussed over the past week. It also further emphasised the relative importance of the fleet at Mers el-Kébir and included six alternative courses of action: 1) requesting active participation by the French Navy in the war 2) requesting French ships to come to British ports where they would not be actively involved in the war 3) demilitarisation of French ships 4) scuttling of French ships 5) take no further action if the French do not agree to any of the above four alternatives. Only the sixth option provided for a military assault, stating “in the last resort to take action against the French Fleet at Oran.”<sup>38</sup> The study concluded with the following recommendation:

We have given most careful consideration to the implications of taking action against the French Fleet at Oran and, after balancing all the arguments both for and against such action, we have reached the conclusion on balance that the operations contemplated should be carried out.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> “Implications of Action Contemplated in Respect of Certain French Ships,” 29 June 1940, CAB 84/15, TNA.

<sup>37</sup> Chiefs of Staff, “Implications of French Hostility, Draft Report,” 4 July 1940, CAB 80/14, TNA.

<sup>38</sup> War Cabinet Chief of Staff Committee Memoranda, “Implications of Action Contemplated in Respect of Certain French Ships,” 30 June 1940, CAB 80/14, TNA.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

This aide memoire reflected the key concerns that had been evident throughout the decision-making process, namely the French contingent at Oran. Option five, to refrain from further action should the French refuse all of the options, was quickly eliminated. This decision was indicative of the British need to showcase their resolve and win over support from both a domestic and global audience.

At the same time that Churchill and his staff were meeting to discuss the proposed Catapult operations, the Admiralty was providing operational instructions to admirals Somerville and Cunningham. Communications directed to Somerville's Force H between 29-30 June illustrated two familiar preoccupations: the perceived importance of *Dunkerque* and *Strasbourg*, and the necessity of avoiding civilian casualties. Force H was instructed not to carry out earlier proposed operations at Algiers, given that the "strength of defences at Algiers and impossibility of avoiding destruction of town, it is not, repetition, not considered justifiable to carry out an operation against that place." [sic]<sup>40</sup> On 30 June the Admiralty sent a signal to Force H and Admiral Cunningham with provisional details of the decision to take action against the French fleet at Mers el-Kébir. A separate naval cypher was also sent to Force H stating: "It is the firm intention of H.M.G. that if the French will not accept any of the alternatives which are being sent to you their ships must be destroyed."<sup>41</sup> The ultimatum contained four alternatives, which Somerville should deliver to Gensoul. Paraphrased, they included: 1) French ships sailed to British harbours to continue the fight 2) French ships sailed to British ports where they would be kept until the conclusion of the war 3) French ships immediately demilitarised to British satisfaction 4) French ships would scuttle themselves.<sup>42</sup> These alternatives were later modified, to remove the option of demilitarisation and add the option of sailing to a French port in the West Indies. Demilitarisation would only be available if the French suggested it themselves after rejecting all of the other alternatives.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> "Operation 'Catapult'," 29 June 1940, SMVL 7/19, CA.

<sup>41</sup> Admiralty to Vice Admiral Force H, 1 July 1941, ADM 1/10321, TNA.

<sup>42</sup> Admiralty to Force H and C-in-C Mediterranean, 30 June 1940, ADM 1/10321, TNA.

<sup>43</sup> Marder, *Dardanelles to Oran*, 232-233.

The Admiralty provided further instructions in the final paragraph of the ultimatum. They reiterated the necessity of removing from service key ships in the French fleet:

If none of the above alternatives are accepted by the French you are to endeavour to destroy ships in MERS EL KEBIR but particularly DUNQUERQUE and STRASBOURG, using all means at your disposal. Ships at Oran should also be destroyed if this will not entail any considerable loss of civilian life.<sup>44</sup>

This directive is crucial because it demonstrates that the object of Catapult was never to achieve destruction of the fleet as a whole. From the first mention of the danger that the French fleet posed in the context of the French capitulation, *Dunkerque* and *Strasbourg* were pinpointed as the most immediate threat. All reports considering action against the fleet acknowledged that the use of force was viable only within the port of Mers el-Kébir. A similar naval bombardment at Alexandria was not feasible as it “would seriously damage Britain’s own naval installations...”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, although the Admiralty did suggest that Godfroy might scuttle his ships, they specified that this would have to be done outside of the harbour.<sup>46</sup>

Ultimately, Alexandria would be given a more lenient ultimatum. The ships at this port simply did not have the same strategic value as those at Mers el-Kébir. Cunningham did not receive instructions from the Admiralty concerning Godfroy’s fleet until 2 July. The Alexandria ultimatum first expressed the desire to obtain the ships for British use. It then included two options if Godfroy refused: leave the ships at Alexandria in “non-seagoing condition” with skeleton crews, or request Godfroy to scuttle the ships at sea.<sup>47</sup> The Royal Navy did undertake operations at both Mers el-Kébir and Alexandria. However the attitudes and risks associated with the two ports differed according to the perceived value of the ships in question and the port installations themselves. Indeed, it was not until 30 June that the War Cabinet decided that Catapult would include French “men-of-war” in the

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<sup>44</sup> “Operation ‘Catapult’,” SMLV 7/19, 29 June 1940, CA.

<sup>45</sup> Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. 6, *Finest Hour 1939-1941* (Hillsdale, Michigan: Hillsdale College Press, 1983), 640.

<sup>46</sup> Simpson, *Cunningham Papers*, 86.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90.

eastern Mediterranean and British ports, not just focus upon Mers el-Kébir.<sup>48</sup> The period over which Catapult developed shows very clearly that British policy towards the French fleet was extremely nuanced. Acknowledging this complexity is important as we move from the initial decision to secure components of the fleet towards the process of explaining publically why such measures were thought to be necessary.

Indeed, developing a strategy towards the French fleet was a far more complex undertaking than Churchill simply forcing a pet project onto a reluctant Cabinet. What became the Catapult operation can only fully be appreciated by examining the British attitude towards the different ships that made up the fleet. The memorandums produced within or for use by the War Cabinet combined these concerns with the desire to use action against the fleet as a way to showcase British power, particularly to an American audience. Certainly, Churchill played a large role, not only in the formulation of policy, but also in its dissemination to the public through his own speeches and statements. For example, Churchill contributed to this draft message:

It is impossible for us, your comrades up till now, to allow your fine ships to fall into the power of the German or Italian enemy. We are determined to fight on to the end, and if we win, as we think we shall, we shall never forget that France was our ally, that our interests are the same as hers, and that our common enemy is Germany. Should we conquer we solemnly declare that we shall restore the greatness of France, and that not an inch of her territory shall be alienated. For this purpose we must make sure that the best ships of the French Navy are not used against us by the common foe.<sup>49</sup>

This excerpt was included as paragraph four in the message given to Admiral Gensoul at Mers el-Kébir. However, the Admiralty themselves also edited and contributed to the message. In addition, the COS played an important and influential role in the policy that became operation Catapult. They backed Catapult but refused to sanction operation Susan, a plan to set up a French

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<sup>48</sup> Gilbert, *Finest Hour*, 629.

<sup>49</sup> Admiralty to Force H and C-in-C Mediterranean, 30 June 1940, ADM 1/10321, TNA.

Government outside of metropolitan France, despite heavy pressure from Churchill. Episodes such as these demonstrate a more even distribution of power and influence, particularly at a point when Churchill had yet to completely win over the government.<sup>50</sup>

On 1 July at a meeting of the War Cabinet at 6 p.m. members reviewed the documents that had been prepared for the Catapult operations, which included revised communications to be given to Admiral Gensoul. French Naval Attaché Admiral Oden'hal had earlier told the Vice Chief of the Naval Staff that Darlan had telegraphed asking the British to reserve final judgment until the details of the armistice conditions were known. Churchill had replied: "discussions as to the armistice conditions could not affect the real facts of the situation."<sup>51</sup> It was also at this meeting that members decided that the option of demilitarisation, as it was originally included in the draft instructions sent to Force H, should not be offered to Gensoul.<sup>52</sup> The final British ultimatum was written in such a way that it presented the French and British as partners in safeguarding French honour. In the original version, the text suggested that the French reputation would be tarnished if Germany were to successfully seize the fleet. However, the wording was modified to emphasise the positive outcome that would result from complying with British demands, rather than the negative consequences of inaction. The final version claimed "that the arrangements that we were proposing was consistent with French honour" [sic].<sup>53</sup> Thus, the British ultimatum made the request for French action synonymous with French honour. The final text of the message containing the four alternatives to be given to Admiral Gensoul was sent to Somerville and copied to Cunningham. The instructions also included the addendum that if the French suggested demilitarisation in place of the other alternatives, this would be acceptable so long as the process was completed within six hours and would render the ships useless for a year.<sup>54</sup> In the days to follow, tensions built around the developments at Mers el-Kébir. Despite Cunningham's best efforts to moderate discussions at Alexandria, news of the bombardments by Force H would see tensions spike, an outcome that Cunningham attributed to Godfroy's obstinate

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<sup>50</sup> Gilbert, *Finest Hour*, 630-631.

<sup>51</sup> Conclusions, Minute 1, Confidential Annex, 1 July 1940, CAB 65/14/1, TNA.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> War Cabinet Conclusions, 2 July 1940, CAB 65/8/3, TNA.

hope for “honour and glory...”<sup>55</sup> More importantly, the inception of events would see each side battle to frame its own interpretation of the actions through competing ideas of honour and wartime necessity.

### **Policy Justification in the Public Sphere**

In July 1940 Churchill's government had little room to manoeuvre. In this atmosphere, the War Cabinet tended to back actions that were not only militarily feasible, but would also demonstrate an unwavering commitment to the continuation of the war effort. In the specific case of the French fleet, it seemed inconceivable to leave such a valuable asset available to the Axis powers. At the same time, policy makers acknowledged the desirability of publically supporting some semblance of the pre-armistice relationship between France and Britain. Similarly, they recognised that it was important to achieve a positive response from the public, and were therefore aware that the outcome of Catapult had to be justified within this sphere. By comparing the discussions that took place in the War Cabinet and the Admiralty to the statements that were later issued to the press and public it will become evident that justifying a policy was considered to be a vital part of the policy as a whole. Aspects such as the uncertain reputation of the French public within metropolitan Britain remained a real concern for policy makers throughout the conflict, and especially in the immediate aftermath of the Franco-German armistice. In other words, policy makers were influenced by how they thought different sectors of the public, both locally and internationally, would respond to a given operation. We have already seen this concern evident in how the British safeguarded the Anglo-American relationship. In this final section, it will become clear just how strategically policy makers sought to take control over or influence the public response through the carefully conceived rhetoric of official statements.

Two things are important when examining the link between policy making and the subsequent messages that were being created for public listeners or readers. First there must be an understanding of where this rhetoric was being distributed. Second, the strength of the argument within these texts must be judged as much as possible within its historic context and not through the lens of British victory in 1945. Certain voices, such as Churchill's, certainly held a large and rather loud role in the public sphere, however, given his role as Prime

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<sup>55</sup> Cunningham to North, 18 July 1940, NRTN 2/3, CA.

Minister this tendency appears less unusual. It would be too easy to place all of the blame for this event upon one individual, simply because his voice, as wartime leader, was loudest in the aftermath. Rather, a more fruitful analysis reconstructs British policy as one that consisted of both a rational cost/benefit analysis in terms of military feasibility and the likelihood that it could be explained or justified to a number of interested publics.

Just prior to 3 July, officials in the Admiralty began finalising the content of public statements for Catapult. On 2 July Lord Alexander gave Churchill a rough draft of the opening statement for a press release to give to the Ministry of Information (MOI) after the operations had commenced. This rough draft contained two sub sections. The first suggested a timeline for publication and the second an actual draft text of the release. The timing of the press release was thought to be the most crucial element, and would depend upon how well the operations had proceeded or were proceeding. Alexander considered two likely scenarios. In the first, the text would be released after the operation was completed. "The publication of the news of our action in regard to the French Fleet must be carefully timed. If things go well it would be desirable to wait until the operation whatever form it takes is complete, and then to announce it with a justification of our actions."<sup>56</sup> In the first scenario, which would see Gensoul accepting British terms and avoiding bloodshed, Catapult would be neatly explained and justified to the public at its completion.

In the second scenario, some sort of resistance from the French and perhaps clashes between the French and British squadrons called for a slightly different approach. If the operation did not go as planned, then the MOI would release information justifying the actions that were currently being taken before the conclusion of the event. "...trouble may ensue and it will then be necessary to explain our attitude and the reasons for the action which we are taking."<sup>57</sup> These two alternatives for the timing of the official explanation of the proceedings were important. What was most evident was the desire to control as much as possible the dissemination of potentially negative or divisive news. Recall that the War Cabinet had earlier agreed to suppress discussion in the press of possible action against the fleet. This tactic allowed official explanations

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<sup>56</sup> Alexander to Churchill, 2 July 1940, PREM 3/179/4, TNA.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

to be written and published without having to first address or acknowledge prior speculations.

Fear of British public outcry after the population had been kept in the dark and fed false information about supposed Allied successes in the battle for the Low Countries and France and the subsequent Dunkirk evacuations also influenced policy maker's attitudes towards press statements. There was an overwhelming demand among much of the population to be kept informed about the war, whether the news was good or bad. The draft publicity releases relating to Catapult in July 1940 addressed this sentiment and devised tactics designed to avoid the backlash liable to result, not from keeping the public uninformed of events as they happened, but from keeping the public uninformed of events not going to plan. This distinction was key. The British government wished to construct a particular image of itself to present to the public: a decision making body that was capable of successfully prosecuting the war. Keeping the population abreast of developing operations, even if they were in the midst of crisis, contributed to a sense of credibility and trustworthiness.

It stands to reason then that the content of Alexander's press communiqué was just as important as the timing of its publication. "But in any event it would seem that the basis of justification for our action is to be found in the communication which the Vice-Admiral Commanding has been instructed to make to the French Commander, and this could well be published as it stands, together with any necessary information."<sup>58</sup> What was striking throughout Alexander's plan was the emphasis that was placed upon *justifying* the event to the public. The connotation of justification denotes a need to not only *explain* one's actions, but to *convince* the audience of the necessity of carrying out those actions.

Within the body of the draft press statement itself, several features in the text were notable. First, at no time was blame placed upon any individual. Rather, the document referred only to the vague body of "the French Government" in describing or justifying the actions that were taken by the British. This technique, in addition to the overall tone of the piece, gave the reader the sense that while the French seemed to be at fault, blame was being administered in a rather vague way on French leadership, not the population as a whole. There was a realistic concern within the War Cabinet that the French

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.



collapse would lead to a resurgence of Francophobia throughout Britain and the Dominions. This issue was also a point of concern in French circles, and was being monitored from London by Cambon. Prior to Catapult he reported that although there was continued anxiety about the fate of the French fleet, the British public remained sympathetic to the plight of the French population more broadly.<sup>59</sup>

The entire argument in the draft report was designed first to delegitimise the French decision to request an armistice and, second, to use this as a basis to justify, or indeed suggest the inevitability of, a British military response. These strategies served to convince the reader not only of the necessity of British action, but also, crucially, of its moral and ethical correctness. The core of the argument was framed in the opening sentence: “The French Government felt that they were unable to continue the struggle on land against Germany and in spite of agreements solemnly entered into with His Majesty’s Government, sought an armistice of the German Government.”<sup>60</sup> In the second half of the statement, Alexander stipulates that seeking the armistice was a violation of the Anglo-French agreements not to conclude a separate peace. This claim established the British right to engage in actions that would rectify the damage caused as a result of breaking this contract. Following this introduction, the draft set out to assert two facts. First, the French fleet and its fate were vital to the British ability to win the war. Second, despite honourable British actions to secure the fate of the fleet prior to the armistice request, the French had not acquiesced. This refusal left the British no choice but to take further action in order to secure her well-being and indeed the well-being of her citizens from German and Italian perfidy.<sup>61</sup> The British were in the unenviable position of being required to trust the word of the Germans and Italians in connection to the non-use of a *vital* asset in the on-going war effort. This position, the press release emphasised, forced the British not to act, but to react.

The grammatical construction of the draft press release also emphasised the agency or the wilful actions of the French in the days leading up to Mers el-Kébir. “The French Government” as an active subject represented the main protagonist in the first half of the narration. In sum:

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<sup>59</sup> Cambon à Vichy, 25 June 1940, 10GMII/292, MAE.

<sup>60</sup> Alexander to Churchill, 2 July 1940, PREM 3/179/4, TNA.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

The French Government felt that they were unable to continue the struggle on land..., the French Government approached the German Government with a request for an armistice..., The French Government...assured His Majesty's Government that they would never sign "dishonourable terms of an armistice with the enemy"..., ...the French Government have put themselves in a position in which it may be impossible for them to give effect to those assurances...<sup>62</sup>

The British Government, on the other hand, was referred to only in the passive tense, giving the allusion that it was being acted upon, rather than acting. Instead of stating, for example, that Churchill's government emphasised the importance of the French fleet to the on-going war effort, the publication stated that this fact "was pointed out to them..." Passive voice makes the subject implicit by placing emphasis on the direct object. This had the effect of making Catapult appear inevitable, or a natural outcome following French action.

It was only in the second half of the draft statement that the British government began to take a more active role. However, the construction still relied substantially upon broad arguments of inevitability. The British were portrayed as having little choice in their subsequent actions: "In these circumstances His Majesty's Government have felt constrained to take action to ensure that important units of the French Fleet shall not come under enemy control for possible use against the British Empire."<sup>63</sup> Again, we see the use of the word 'felt', but this time it is followed by an adverb: 'constrained'. This addition again lends a sense of inevitability to Catapult by implying that there were no alternative strategies. The tone achieved in this piece allocated full responsibility for the chain of events leading to 3 July on the French government and eliminated British agency. This left the reader with the perception that there was simply no other course of action that the British could have followed. This draft was, in essence, an ideal response to an outcome that was as yet unknown. Unfortunately, Catapult did not go as smoothly as this draft envisaged.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

British policy towards the French fleet rested upon a broad two-part consensus. First, the importance of the fleet required its neutralisation. Second, this process would take different forms according to the actual circumstances at each port and the ships that were docked there. From early on, military considerations played a crucial role. They included the actual material requirements of the British naval forces as well as the nature and extent of the French response towards British actions, especially hostile actions. Previous studies have failed to consider both the nuances and limitations of British policy. This chapter has laid out these differences as crucial to understanding how rhetoric would, in the aftermath of the bombardments, distort policy in favour of a coherent image of British strength and resolve. This outcome will become more apparent in the following chapter.

From the initial stages of the policy formation, it was clear that neutralising the ships at Mers el-Kébir, particularly *Dunkerque* and *Strasbourg* was of the greatest strategic value to the British. Their location, within a military port also meant that bombardment was feasible, as collateral damages such as civilian casualties and the destruction of the town were not pertinent factors. Considering and limiting Catapult based on the possibility of civilian deaths reflected the present belief within the Cabinet that civilian death in wartime was still indefensible, or at least difficult to justify. In essence, these discussions showed that the decision making process not only encompassed what was possible or feasible on a purely military level. They also accepted the need to explain and justify wartime operations on a normative and moral level within the public sphere. Essentially, in anticipating how the public might respond to a particular operation, policy makers were incorporating popular opinion (or at least their conception of it) into the policy itself. In this instance the perceived innocence of civilians acted as a limiting factor just as material strength.

Examining the policy making process that was being carried out within the War Cabinet has made clear that assessments of public opinion did play a role in the minds of decision makers. This was apparent in the early acknowledgement that British public opinion was already receptive to action against the French fleet as well as the strategic considerations and carefully worded structure of the draft press release explaining the operation. Furthermore, the desire to maintain pro-British sentiments in metropolitan

France would serve as an additional check on British rhetoric. Of course, policy makers could and would attempt to sway or influence the press or public response through their strategic use of rhetoric.

Understanding the Catapult operations through the planning process and the aftermath of the bombardments must also take into account how secretive policy making became official explanations. The early draft press release displayed a clear attempt to exonerate and justify British actions on a moral level, and essentially blame the French government without alienating the broader French public. This approach attempted to maintain a sense of the partnership that had existed so recently between the French and British under the premise of the continuing struggle and eventual rescue of the French by the British. As events around the fleet unfolded, policy makers would be forced to modify their press releases to not only reflect but more importantly justify, the starker reality of the outcome. How they would do this would reveal the ever-present concern not only in regards to public sentiment at home, but also the continuing attempt to publically delegitimise the French government while maintaining the support of the larger population.

## Chapter 4: Making Mers el-Kébir Inevitable

### “There is Agreement Everywhere that the British Had No Other Choice”<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

On 3 July 1940, in an 11:30 a.m. War Cabinet meeting, British ministers made three decisions. First, they agreed not to release precise statistics concerning air raid deaths and injuries to the public as this was likely to harm morale. Second, they sent a noncommittal note to former French premier Édouard Daladier in response to his request to come to Britain. The reason for this delaying tactic was that his arrival in the UK “might be embarrassing politically.”<sup>2</sup> These two examples demonstrate the strength that intangible, but nonetheless powerful factors such as morale and political embarrassment (both of which were ultimately linked to public support) held within the minds of policy makers. Specifically, these decisions were motivated by the fear of precipitating adverse reactions from the British public. Finally, Churchill’s ministerial colleagues confirmed that the Prime Minister would address the Commons the following day regarding the operations currently underway to contain the French fleet.<sup>3</sup> Churchill’s speech, moreover, was only one in a series of public announcements concerning the fleet. As the Catapult negotiations dragged on, these policy makers continued to revise and re-revise press statements and speeches explaining why the Royal Navy had just engaged in what was ostensibly an act of war against its former ally.

The planning process has demonstrated how a variety of factors and concerns shaped the operational boundaries for Catapult. In particular, the previous chapter highlighted the importance of the French fleet to both Pétain’s government and the on-going British war effort. In the British case, it stressed the extent to which policy making drew upon strategic concerns and less tangible factors such as being able to justify the use of violence against particular parts of the fleet. Bearing in mind that military operations against the fleet were viable from a material perspective, more symbolic ethical and moral considerations played a key role in limiting violent action to specific zones in which the risk of extensive civilian casualties was minimized. This chapter will begin by examining the course of events as they developed on 3 July. Such an

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<sup>1</sup> “The Navy Does its Job, U.S. Press Comment,” *The Times*, 6 July 1940, 4.

<sup>2</sup> War Cabinet 192 (40) Conclusions, 3 July 1940, CAB/65/8/4, The National Archives, [Henceforward TNA].

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

approach will demonstrate, first, that material factors such as limited time and poor communications impacted on the outcome at Mers el-Kébir. Second, one cannot understand the subsequent rhetorical justification of the bombardment without fully appreciating the discontinuity between the relatively straightforward timeline of events on the one hand and the interpretation of events as both more subjective and emotional on the other hand. Official communiqués, in other words distilled the policy making process in such a way that the bombardments appeared to be a tragic but unavoidable element of war.

The bulk of this chapter will be taken up by analyses of official statements and media responses from both sides of the Channel. Until operation Catapult commenced on 3 July, British policy makers had to formulate detailed publicity plans based upon a number of possible outcomes. An examination of this process will illustrate that the operations at Mers el-Kébir were more than a strategic gambit. For many within Britain, they were the manifestation of a broader sentiment that called for - and indeed craved - decisive action. Moreover, the press releases and radio addresses that emerged from the War Cabinet and Admiralty offices highlighted the desire to gain approval not just from the British public but also from further afield. Specifically, from within governing circles in Washington and the wider American public. This goal made the public representation of the operations crucial. Indeed, considering and planning how to present the outcome of Catapult made up a significant part of the planning process that unfolded in the War Cabinet.

What emerged from this process, on the British side, was a series of statements that described the bombardments as a literal demonstration of British strength and determination. At the same time, the French condemned British policy at Mers el-Kébir for its brutality against a neutral state and its alleged failure to engage in established patterns of conventional diplomacy. The British may not have had many military options available to them in July 1940. However, this weakness was certainly not evident in the rhetoric that followed the fleet bombardments. Rather, justifications pressed home the inevitability of the operation and framed the bombardments as a sign of unswerving British resolve and the country's undiminished capacity to face the broader struggle against the Axis Powers. At the same time, Britain continued attempts to foster the support of metropolitan France by rhetorically exonerating the general French population from the "Men of Vichy." While Pétain and Paul Baudouin's

Ministry of Foreign Affairs likewise attempted to sway American and global opinion against the “British aggressions,” it quickly became clear that the vast majority of the international press was more inclined to believe the bombardments were a reasonable course of action.

Following on official statements, speeches and broadcasts, mass media outlets in both France and Britain remained consistent with or even expanded upon these pre-established arguments. The British press drew on an abundance of historic imagery to further justify the brutality of the operations. This tactic connected past victories with the present conflict in order to suggest future success. On the French side Mers el-Kébir was the pivotal event that dictated how Anglo-French relations were portrayed for the rest of the war. It was described as the resurgence of a British policy of territorial violation and blatant aggression. After the conclusion of the Franco-German armistice, the legitimacy of unoccupied France as an imperial nation depended hugely on its ability to maintain the territorial integrity of both the metropole and its colonies. British and later Free French incursions were at the very core challenges to French sovereignty, and specifically the legitimacy of Pétain’s government. Countering this challenge by claiming the rights of a neutral nation and dismissing the Gaullist movement was of paramount importance. Both of these concerns were represented throughout the mass media. What follows is a more detailed study of first, how negotiations at Mers el-Kébir ultimately led to naval bombardment and second how both governmental and media outlets dealt with and tried to explain these events from their respective positions either inside or outside of the on going conflict.

### **Timeline of Events**

In the days leading up to 3 July Admiral Somerville finalised detailed operational plans that tried to anticipate and prepare for how Admiral Gensoul, the leader of the *Force de Raid* moored at Mers el-Kébir, would respond to the ultimatum. On 30 June flag officers and senior commanding officers met on board the battle cruiser *HMS Hood*. Here, they agreed that were it to become necessary, a bombardment at Mers el-Kébir would be carried out in three phases. First, Somerville would order rounds to be fired purely as a means to scare the French and indicate British resolve. If the French still refused British terms, limited gunfire and bombing would be initiated to prompt evacuation of the ships. Last,

torpedoes or other means would sink the ships. Similar destructive action at the nearby non-military port of Oran was, as we know, not considered permissible due to the likely high loss of civilian life.<sup>4</sup> Operational orders dated 1 July formalised this three-stage approach. Stage II parts 1 and 2 were described as follows: 1) "Show that we are in earnest by offensive action without endangering French ships. 2) "Destroy the French ships by our own actions."<sup>5</sup> This was a coherent plan created by British admiralty commanders to disable vital units of the French Fleet at Mers el-Kébir. It anticipated only very limited casualties due to the two-stage warning system.

At 10:45 a.m. on 3 July, Admiral Somerville noted in his diary that the French were furling their awnings, an act which could only be construed as readying for a fight. The Admiralty subsequently suggested seeding the harbour with magnetic mines to prevent the fleet's escape.<sup>6</sup> Early that same morning, Somerville had received another message from the Admiralty. It stated that although there was no time limit linked to the French response, it was important that the proceedings be completed, whatever the outcome, before the sun went down that day.<sup>7</sup> This stipulation had a direct impact on the negotiations because it imposed a highly restrictive time frame. Somerville's Vice Admiral Cedric Holland delivered the terms of the British ultimatum and the accompanying message to the French Admiralty between 11:00 a.m. and 11:15 a.m. on the morning of 3 July. Holland was a fluent French speaker and had been given the unsavoury task of delivering the ultimatum to Admiral Gonsoul. However, Gonsoul, offended that a ranking captain had brought the message, and not an admiral, refused to see Holland, forcing him to wait in his boat for the French Admiralty barge to deliver a response.<sup>8</sup> Gonsoul was proving highly uncooperative even though, as one of the only Protestants in the heavily Catholic French Navy, Somerville considered him to be relatively Anglophilic. On 24 June British Admiral Dudley North had visited Gonsoul in an attempt to take advantage of his personal sympathies and persuade him to continue the war

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<sup>4</sup> Admiral Somerville's Official Report, 26 July 1940, ADM 199/826, TNA.

<sup>5</sup> "Operation Orders for Operation 'Catapult'," 1 July 1940, SMVL 7/19, CA.

<sup>6</sup> Admiral Somerville's official report, 26 July 1940, ADM 199/826, TNA.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Admiral Somerville's Official Report, 26 July 1940, ADM 199/826, TNA.



alongside Britain. However, he had refused on the grounds that he was bound to obey the orders of the French government.<sup>9</sup>

At 11:30 a.m., First Sea Lord Pound sent a message informing Force H that he was drafting a signal that would offer the French immediate demilitarisation in addition to the options stated in the ultimatum. However, Pound telephoned Somerville at 12:32 p.m. to inform him that the draft had not been approved and that "Admiralty orders V.A. (H) to inform French Fleet that if they move he will open fire if he considers that they are preparing to leave harbour."<sup>10</sup> Gensoul had, in the meantime, conveyed the British ultimatum to his superiors at the Admiralty, although he failed to mention the option to move the fleet to a port in the French West Indies or the United States.<sup>11</sup> However, given Gensoul's clearly stated refusal of the ultimatum as well as his belief that the British were in any case unlikely to open fire on the fleet, it was improbable that knowledge of this option would have radically changed the outcome of events.<sup>12</sup> Through the negotiation process, Gensoul made no move to evacuate his ships against the possibility of attack, nor did he display any real intention to concede to any of the British requests. This inaction was a symptom of the belief on both sides that actual bombardment was highly unlikely. To the British the most important outcome was the public display of Pétain's government yielding to British strength and resolve. The decision not to offer demilitarisation after having delivered the original ultimatum rested upon this idea. War Cabinet minutes stated that to do so "would look like weakening."<sup>13</sup>

Following the receipt of the British ultimatum, both admirals waited for his counterpart to yield. At 11:51 a.m. and again just after 12:09 p.m., Gensoul repeated his resolve to fight, rather than acquiesce to the British terms. Somerville prepared to open fire.<sup>14</sup> However, Vice Admiral Holland suggested waiting and Somerville extended the ultimatum deadline.<sup>15</sup> From this point onward, the decisions taken by Gensoul and Somerville illustrated a high level

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<sup>9</sup> Philippe Lasterle, "Could Admiral Gensoul Have Averted the Tragedy of Mers el-Kébir?" *The Journal of Military History* 67, no. 3 (2003): 840.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Lasterle, "Admiral Gensoul," 836.

<sup>12</sup> Robert and Isabelle Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy: The French and the British from the Sun King to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 565.

<sup>13</sup> W.M. (40) 192<sup>nd</sup> Conclusions, Minute 2, 3 July 1940, CAB 65/14/3, TNA.

<sup>14</sup> Admiral Somerville's Official Report, 26 July 1940, ADM 199/826, TNA.

<sup>15</sup> Somerville's Pocket Diary, 3 July 1940, SMVL 1/31, Churchill Archive Centre, [Henceforward CA].

of uncertainty on both sides, further impacted by the setting sun. Like Gensoul, Somerville himself believed his counterpart would ultimately yield. He was also loath to open fire upon the French ships and interpreted French inaction as a sign of weakening. He extended the deadline for British action to 3:30 p.m.<sup>16</sup> Gensoul eventually agreed to meet the British delegation, and a meeting aboard the *Dunkerque* commenced at 2:15 p.m. The British Admiralty had informed Somerville on 2 July that the French had in place a procedure for demilitarising their ships, which could be completed in two hours. Somerville informed Holland that “should necessity arise” he should discuss this plan with the French during negotiations and ascertain if the process would put the ships fully out of commission for 12 months.<sup>17</sup> However, the impending arrival of French reinforcements from Toulon and Algiers heightened tensions in the negotiating environment. An Admiralty signal sent to Force H at 4:14 p.m. instructed Somerville that it was imperative to quickly resolve on going operations as “he may have French reinforcements to deal with.”<sup>18</sup> Gensoul received a similar message from Admiral Le Luc, Chief of Darlan’s personal staff, at 5:18 p.m.<sup>19</sup>

As darkness encroached, both sides were under pressure to end the standoff. Negotiations drew to a close and Gensoul issued a final written statement reiterating his intention to respond to force with force.<sup>20</sup> The British report of the final moments described the scene upon the French ships as being in “an advanced state of readiness for sea...tugs were ready by the sterns of each battleship. Guns were trained fore and aft.”<sup>21</sup> At 5:53 p.m. Somerville gave the order to open fire upon the French fleet and reported to the Admiralty that he was being heavily engaged at 6:00 p.m. A delayed signal arrived from the Admiralty at 6:26 p.m. *after* the bombardment was in progress, informing Force H that the French must comply with British terms, scuttle themselves, or be sunk

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Lasterle, “Admiral Gensoul,” 843.

<sup>20</sup> Arthur Marder, *From the Dardanelles to Oran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 249.

<sup>21</sup> “Narrative of Third July, ”First Sea Lord’s Records 1939-1940, ADM 205/6, TNA.

by the British before dark.<sup>22</sup> The fact that this signal arrived after the bombardment was already underway suggests that although Somerville may have had reservations about firing upon the fleet, his decision to do so was not a result of a *final* direct order from either Churchill or the Admiralty. Rather, Somerville, in his position as the local commander of this operation, gave the order to fire in response to real-time pressure. Ultimately, the ten-minute bombardment of the fleet at Mers el-Kébir left 1,297 dead and 351 wounded on the French side. The British suffered two light injuries.<sup>23</sup>

Factors such as poor and delayed communications, the threat of French reinforcements, and approaching darkness clearly influenced the final outcome at Mers el-Kébir. Not knowing when and if French reinforcements were likely to arrive, Somerville, particularly in the final hours of negotiations, was making decisions while under immense time pressure. Hesitations on both sides also contributed to the relative chaos of the final moments. Gensoul, to the very last, made no move to evacuate his ships, still believing that his recent comrades would never follow through on their threats. Holland also doubted that force would be necessary, writing in his report of events, "My answer to ask for a final reply before fire was opened was based on my appreciation of the French character since I have often found that an initial flat refusal will gradually come round to an acquiescence."<sup>24</sup> Both actors misinterpreted the situation to the extent that they refused to believe that the other party would consent to the use of force. However, it was the British command to fire directly at the fleet without first giving the French the opportunity to evacuate that would in later years be held up as a callous and brutal display of violence. Nevertheless, the broader context of the situation was also relevant. Namely, Britain was under threat of imminent invasion. Taking action to decisively neutralise the French fleet would free up British ships from shadowing their French counterparts and allow them to return to home waters to patrol against invading forces.<sup>25</sup> In addition, even if Somerville had reached an agreement on French disarmament of the fleet, it

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<sup>22</sup> Admiral Somerville's Official Report, 26 July 1940, ADM 199/826, TNA. Somerville's pocket diary listed 17.45 as the time at which he opened fire, SMVL 1/31, CA.

<sup>23</sup> Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy*, 565.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill, Volume VI Finest Hour 1939-1941* (Hillsdale, Michigan: Hillsdale College Press, 1983), 630.

could not have been carried out within six hours given the approaching darkness as well as the impending arrival of reinforcements.

Seeing how operation Catapult unfolded in real time on 3 July makes it clear that both Somerville and Gensoul were making decisions in a highly uncertain environment. With France newly withdrawn from the war, it was still unclear how official sentiments and loyalties would align themselves. The British were, in all respects, very limited militarily. They were preparing for a defensive phase of the conflict, which would require the most efficient use of their naval resources. There was also a strong desire to dispel uncertainty and bolster morale within Britain while encouraging pro-British sentiment in America. In this sense, the willingness to take hostile action against the fleet was tremendously symbolic. This symbolism will become more apparent in the following sections.

### **Revision: Redrafting Press Releases and Statements**

In his typically sarcastic style, Alexander Cadogan wrote on 3 July of his role in penning “a draft to French explaining why we were blowing their fleet out of the water.” [sic]<sup>26</sup> The bombardments at Mers el-Kébir signalled the inception of a rhetorical battle in which Vichy and Britain each put forward their own interpretation of events via their respective media sources. Furthermore, each press release or speech was written in the hope that it would receive validation from American leaders. Diplomat Robert Vansittart was at the time suggesting a more robust programme of pro-British propaganda in the United States “to meet the Franco-German drive against us there.”<sup>27</sup> Broadly speaking, British official publications mobilised two main themes. First, they suggested that the operations to contain the French fleet were an inevitable outcome of the Franco-German Armistice. Second, they argued that the bombardments did not constitute a rupture in Anglo-French relations. British victory, which could only be secured by maintaining such determined policies, was the sole means of freeing France from its German occupiers and Pétain’s defeatist government. Examining a series of initial publicity releases generated by the War Cabinet and Admiralty as well as Churchill’s 4 July Commons speech in greater detail will show how these ideas were carefully spun into this rhetorical claim.

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<sup>26</sup> Alexander Cadogan, *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938-1945*, ed. David Dilks (London: Cassell, 1971), 309.

<sup>27</sup> Vansittart to Cooper, 5 July 1940, VNST II 1/8, CA.

The first was a radio address, which First Lord of the Admiralty Alexander prepared and edited prior to its broadcast on 4 July. In it, Alexander maintained that Britain was forced to act because it could not in good faith leave the fate of the fleet to the credibility of German promises. These claims were crucial in allowing Alexander to frame the bombardments as unavoidable while at the same time refraining from overt criticism of the French nation as a whole. For example, his address described the operations as "...the steps we have been compelled to take..."<sup>28</sup> He also praised Somerville and Force H for "...not shrinking when it became inevitable to take the action necessary in their duty towards their country and the cause of liberty." The use of the passive voice in the first instance removed a visible subject, or driver of action from his depiction. In other words, it suggested but did not name the individuals (Pétain, Darlan or Gensoul, for example) whose actions had made it necessary for Britain to take offensive measures against the fleet. This grammatical formulation was used to the same effect in describing the moment that the British contingent opened fire. "Only when all the alternatives *had been rejected* did the Navy take the action which His Majesty's Government had considered themselves compelled to order in the last resort."<sup>29</sup> Alexander's statement also changed references to the "Pétain" government to the "Bordeaux" government. This reflected the understanding that Pétain himself was a popular figure amongst the French public. Overt personal criticism of the Hero of Verdun risked alienating a significant part of the population.

The second document in question was a revised press statement, prepared jointly between members of the War Cabinet and the Admiralty. It would be issued through the Ministry of Information (MOI). Similar to the above radio address, it emphasised the dishonesty of the German and Italian victors, the resulting necessity for British action, and the inevitability of the outcome given Gensoul's misplaced allegiance to the new metropolitan government. After again reminding the reader of the Franco-German armistice and the proven untrustworthiness of the Axis Powers, the article immediately justified British actions. The line, "HMG...felt that they were compelled, not only in their own interests, but also in the hope of restoring the independence of France and the

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<sup>28</sup> Radio Broadcast, 4 July 1940, AVAR 13/4, CA.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Pétain's government moved from Bordeaux to Vichy on 1 July, after the armistice placed the former in the occupation zone.

integrity of the French Empire, to take steps...,”<sup>30</sup> cast Britain as the guardian of the legitimate French state and its environs. In doing so, the statement undermined the validity of Pétain’s government and purported that altruism, rather than national self interest, was driving British foreign policy. This claim will be discussed in more detail as one of the main themes of Churchill’s Commons address. The wording of the sentence also subtly distanced the British from the decision to take action. The government “felt that they were compelled” to take action.<sup>31</sup> As we saw previously, including the word ‘felt’ added emotion and uncertainty to the process. The second part of this phrase, “they were compelled,” demonstrated the inevitable nature of the final choice, again giving the British only a passive role as decision maker. Lastly, this and future references to the empire recognised how important overseas territories were to a nation’s legitimacy and power. Akhila Yechury and Emile Chabal have examined the role that empire played wartime policy writing, “In the same way that Dunkirk marked a point of sharply diverging memories between the two metropolitan powers, Mers el-Kébir inaugurated a period in which the empire played a vital role in shaping the future of both nations.”<sup>32</sup> This theme will be expanded upon further in the upcoming chapters.

This press release was edited further to downplay any suggestion of overt Anglo-French hostility. The original text depicting the Franco-German armistice stated that the French government “undertook by the terms of the Armistice to hand over their Fleet to the enemy.”<sup>33</sup> The words “hand over” were changed to “allow,” transferring agency from the French to the Germans.<sup>34</sup> The following excerpt, with edits noted shows how further revisions changed the tone of the writing. Note in particular how the word “hostilities” was replaced with “operations.”

H.M.G. deeply regret that the French Admiral in command at Oran refused to accept any of the conditions proposed, with the inevitable result that ~~hostilities broke out between British and~~ action

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<sup>30</sup> “Proposed Statement to the Press,” July 1940, PREM 3/179/4, TNA.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Akhila Yechury and Emile Chabal, “Introduction,” in *Britain and France in Two World Wars: Truth, Myth and Memory*, eds. Robert Tombs and Emile Chabal (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 88.

<sup>33</sup> “Proposed Statement to the Press,” July 1940, PREM 3/179/4, TNA.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

had to be taken against the French vessels in that locality. These ~~hostilities~~ (operations) are still proceeding.<sup>35</sup>

This excerpt proposed that Catapult, and the bombardments that resulted, were an ethical course of action during a time of war. Discussions within the War Cabinet had earlier vetoed the possibility of offering compensation for the families of French personnel killed at Mers el-Kébir. It was thought that such a move would be “misinterpreted” as an apology and acknowledgement of wrongdoing.<sup>36</sup> These discussions sat uncomfortably alongside Somerville’s carefully prepared plan for warning shots and evacuation. The article as a whole displayed an attempt to maintain some semblance of the Anglo-French partnership that had existed before the armistice by refusing to acknowledge the proposed state of neutrality imposed by the metropolitan government.

While this draft was being edited, the War Cabinet met to determine when the statement should be released to the local press. They also talked about producing a second announcement for the American press.<sup>37</sup> These preparations anticipated the impact that the operations would have in the metropole and on a more global stage. In the days following the bombardment, Political Intelligence Reports compiled by the Foreign Office concluded that the general effect, “especially in the United States, has been to enhance British prestige.”<sup>38</sup> British ambassador in Washington Lord Lothian also sent news that the American response had been positive. However, he warned that German and French sources would be anxious to portray the French as victims. British publicity, he suggested, should be prepared to counter French attempts to depict the operations as “treacherous.”<sup>39</sup> Alexander’s second radio broadcast, which he produced for an overseas audience, certainly spared no effort in emphasising the tragic necessity of the operations while hinting at the continuity of Anglo-French comradeship. The following excerpt with edits highlighted Britain’s lack of options when it came to the French fleet: “In British ports and at Alexandria we ~~are thankful to have been able to~~ (had to) taken under our control...”<sup>40</sup> The substitution of “had to” in place of “are thankful to” and “been able to” indicated

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> War Cabinet Conclusions, 4 July 1940, CAB 65/8/5, TNA.

<sup>37</sup> War Cabinet Conclusions, 4 July 1940, CAB 65/8/5, TNA.

<sup>38</sup> Weekly Political Intelligence Summaries, 9 July 1940, FO 371/25235, TNA.

<sup>39</sup> Lord Lothian to Foreign Office, 9 July 1940, FO 371/24321, TNA.

<sup>40</sup> Broadcast “The Work of the Royal Navy Today,” 13-14 July 1940, AVAR 13/5, CA.

both the absolute necessity of the operation and justified the tragic results. Moreover, having to do something, as opposed to being thankful that something has taken place (lack of agency) highlighted British determination to take steps to successfully prosecute the war. The same address also reinforced the moral superiority of the British, Imperial and American struggle: "...united as never before in defence of Christianity, of civilization and of the kindly, tolerant way of life which we have evolved through the centuries and which has developed with equal calm and fruitful benevolence among our sister nations the British Commonwealth and in America. Our cause is wholly righteous."<sup>41</sup> After the statement was released over the radio in mid-July, Alexander concluded that the American response had been generally positive. He described the American public as hopeful that the British public were as resolved in the upcoming battle as their leadership appeared to be.<sup>42</sup>

Churchill's 4 July Commons address was perhaps the most exhaustive official response to appear in the aftermath of the attacks. The extent to which it would be featured in the press warrants a more detailed analysis. This speech, while similar to the press releases in some respects, provided a clearer delineation between Pétain's government and the French nation as a whole. It was also more overt and grandiose in promising eventual British victory. In this manner, Churchill shifted the focus away from the ruthlessness of the bombardments, presenting the entire policy not as a choice, but rather as a logical response to the French refusal to guarantee the safety of the fleet. Before analysing the actual content of Churchill's address, it is important to note that Lord Halifax, on the same day in the House of Lords, gave an identical speech explaining and justifying what had taken place at Mers el-Kébir. The point of mentioning this parallel statement is that Churchill's position as Prime Minister lent his words more weight in shaping how this wartime episode would be remembered, both at the time the speech was given and today. Rhetoric then, is given short-term value according to who the statements are attributed. Its staying power, or long-term significance only appreciates if the arguments that were being made are later validated. In this case many of Churchill's statements were confirmed because of the British victory not because of their inherent oratorical value.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



Early in the speech, Churchill linked the idea of British victory with French prestige: “But the least that could be expected was that the French Government, in abandoning the conflict and leaving its whole weight to fall upon Great Britain and the British Empire, would have been careful not to inflict needless injury upon their faithful comrade, in whose final victory the sole chance of French freedom lay and lies.”<sup>43</sup> First, the choice of language in this excerpt, compared to that of the draft press releases, was much more aggressive. It employed strong verbs such as ‘abandoning’ and ‘inflict’. Both suggested malicious intent on the part of the French government. On the other hand, the text clearly marked the British as very much a father figure to France, who had no chance of victory, or indeed future political influence, without their assistance.

After denigrating the new government, Churchill unreservedly separated the will of the French people from the defeatist origins of the Bordeaux/Vichy government. “Thus I must place on record that what might have been a mortal injury was done to us by the Bordeaux Government with full knowledge of the consequences and of our dangers, and after rejecting all our appeals at the moment when they were abandoning the Alliance, and breaking the engagements which fortified it.”<sup>44</sup> Equating the current position of the French fleet to a “mortal injury” to the British war effort left no doubt as to the validity of the British actions that followed. This sentence also made it clear that the “Bordeaux Government” could not claim the popular support that would have made it a truly representative government. This notion of illegitimacy was built upon in the following paragraphs.

Churchill described the final weeks of June and the Franco-German armistice negotiations: “There was another example of this callous and perhaps even malevolent treatment which we received, not indeed from the French nation, who have never been and apparently never are to be consulted upon these transactions, but from the Bordeaux Government.”<sup>45</sup> This claim was unsubstantiated and greatly exaggerated. In the chaos of the exodus, most refugees and even French soldiers met Pétain’s call for an armistice with

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<sup>43</sup> *Hansard* HC Deb vol. 362 col. 1043 (4 July 1940)  
<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/jul/04/french-fleet>.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

relief.<sup>46</sup> In addition, Pétain's government did not experience serious dissent, and in fact was relatively popular until at least the close of 1941.<sup>47</sup> What Churchill's speech and the two draft press releases tried to do was maintain the illusion that the French nation remained tied to the Allied war effort. They did this by distancing the French public from the metropolitan government, which, by the same token, implied that the French people favoured Britain and de Gaulle's alternative French movement. France's new government, referred to as the "Bordeaux Government" and later the "Vichy Government" was described not only as unrepresentative of the French people, but as an illegitimate governing body. This policy was reiterated throughout the war. On 8 July Desmond Morton requested that the MOI instruct the BBC and press sources to refer to the metropolitan government as the "Vichy Government" or "Pétain Government" but not "France" or the "French Government."<sup>48</sup>

Churchill closed his address by stressing that the War Cabinet had embarked upon Catapult with a heavy heart but a unanimous sense of purpose.<sup>49</sup> He suggested that the bombardment, however tragic, was an eventuality for which the Cabinet and Admiralty were well prepared. Unsurprisingly, he did not mention why the ships had not been evacuated prior to the bombardment. Portraying the outcome at Mers el-Kébir as an "unfortunate necessity" normalised the deaths of the French sailors as casualties of war. Churchill made a strong case that accomplished three things: it validated British actions, defended the French citizenry, and castigated the Bordeaux government for betraying its British allies and the French nation. In concluding, he employed a classic rhetorical technique: he appeared to give his audience the opportunity to digest the facts for themselves and reach a logical conclusion. "I leave the judgment of our action, with confidence, to Parliament. I leave it to the nation, and I leave it to the United States. I leave it to the world and to

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<sup>46</sup> Hannah Diamond, *Fleeing Hitler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 113, 116.

<sup>47</sup> Robert O Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order 1940-1944* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 38.

<sup>48</sup> "Vansittart Committee," 8 July 1940, GB165-0269, Middle East Centre Archives, [Henceforward MECA].

<sup>49</sup> Winston Churchill, ed., *Into Battle: Speeches by the Right Hon. Winston S. Churchill, PC, MP* (London: Cassell, 1941), 240-241.

history.”<sup>50</sup> Churchill understood that rhetoric was persuasive. More importantly, though, he understood that it needed to strike a delicate balance between presenting an argument for consideration and blatantly telling the public what to think. Moreover, remember that the War Cabinet was confident of receiving support for a strong policy towards the French fleet. This knowledge makes Churchill’s statement, which boldly called for the world to judge British actions at Mers el-Kébir appear far less daring.

Churchill’s Commons speech was reportedly met with great approval from both sides of the House, and a feeling of relief, reflected by two full minutes of cheering. Even *Chargé d’Affaires* Roger Cambon acknowledged its undeniably warm reception. Writing to Foreign Minister Baudouin, he described the general sentiment of both the political establishment and the broader population as one of determination and refusal to compromise on issues that were perceived to affect the prosecution of the war.<sup>51</sup> Cadogan wrote in his diary that day that while the results of Catapult were not ideal, “Winston was able to make good enough showing in House and had a good reception.”<sup>52</sup> [sic] John Colville echoed this sentiment, adding that global reactions were supportive of the bombardments. “There is a strange admiration for force everywhere today,” he mused.<sup>53</sup> Immediately after the bombardments, there was a strong consensus, certainly within Britain, but also in the United States, that this was the right policy. Churchill’s private secretary Eric Seal wrote to his wife regarding the address, “The speech was good, but not better than the others... I think that there had been a great deal more anxiety than we realized about the French Fleet, and there was a general relief that such vigorous action had been taken.”<sup>54</sup>

As far as the French war effort led from London was concerned, its leader General Charles de Gaulle had no part in the British decision-making process. De Gaulle nonetheless issued his own response to the operations. Spears reported to Churchill that de Gaulle’s reaction to the bombardments was “on the

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<sup>50</sup> *Hansard* HC Deb vol 362 col. 1049 (4 July 1940)

<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/jul/04/french-fleet>.

<sup>51</sup> Cambon to Baudouin, 5 July 1940, 10GMII/336, MAE.

<sup>52</sup> Cadogan, *Diaries*, 310.

<sup>53</sup> John Colville, *Diaries*, 4-5 July 1940, CLVL 1.3, CA.

<sup>54</sup> Gilbert, *Finest Hour*, 642-643.

whole better than I should have expected.”<sup>55</sup> De Gaulle’s radio address on 8 July echoed the British official line, recognising that the enemy would surely have used the French fleet against Britain, as well as the French empire.<sup>56</sup> He called on Frenchmen to see the tragedy as one more step towards victory, or from the “point of view of victory and deliverance.”<sup>57</sup> Behind the scenes, de Gaulle was seething. He described his “pain and anger” over Mers el-Kébir, and his particular dislike of the way the British appeared to “glory in” the operations.<sup>58</sup> His willingness, however grudging, to support the efficacy of the bombardments publically showed how little room de Gaulle actually had to act unilaterally. More importantly, however, it demonstrated that being in the same camp as the British rhetorically was a means to assert power and legitimacy by appearing to sanction or condone such high level policies. Challenging British policy towards the French empire and metropolitan France would only reveal how little influence the Free French actually had.

In Vichy, Baudouin was also using rhetoric as a means to build up support for the metropolitan government in American circles. Pétain even penned a three-page letter to Roosevelt urging him to see the injustice of British policy.<sup>59</sup> Baudouin issued French communiqués to the U.S. State Department with the expectation that the information would be passed on to the American press. These communications presented a straightforward case of British aggression including the ultimatum, the use of magnetic mines to seal off the port and final command to open fire.<sup>60</sup> High commissioner for propaganda, Jean Prouvost reported to the American press that Churchill had undertaken an act of aggression “unprecedented in history.”<sup>61</sup> Baudouin also prepared talking points, which he sent to French embassies and consulates around the world. He hoped to validate the position of the Vichy government by depicting the bombardments as an unwarranted act of violence. Writing to the diplomatic mission in Berne,

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<sup>55</sup> Spears to Churchill, July 1940, PREM 3/276, TNA.

<sup>56</sup> “Allocution de Général de Gaulle, Daventry en Français,” 8 July 1940, 9GMII/295, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, [Henceforward MAE].

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Charles de Gaulle, *The Complete War Memoirs of Charles de Gaulle*, vol. 1, *The Call to Honour, 1940-1942*, trans Jonathan Griffin (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1955), 92.

<sup>59</sup> Pétain to Roosevelt, 4 July 1940, 10GMII/336, MAE.

<sup>60</sup> “Agressions Anglaises, Mers el Kébir, Réactions étrangères,” 3 July 1940, 10GMII/336, MAE.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

Switzerland, Baudouin described the attacks as “brutal and inexcusable.”<sup>62</sup> He directed diplomatic staff to impart upon the public and government officials in their respective postings the terrible nature of the British attack and Churchill’s tendency to “alter the truth” of what had happened.<sup>63</sup> Despite Baudouin’s best efforts, however, the results were disappointing. Only international responses from Spain, Bulgaria and Romania appeared to be sympathetic to the French plight.<sup>64</sup>

Within metropolitan France, guarding the sovereignty of the unoccupied zone, the fleet, and the empire was of primary importance to France’s survival as a nation state. Doing so through rhetoric that portrayed British operations as a violation of the rights of a sovereign and neutral country would become a tactic that was repeated after each fresh offense in Dakar, North Africa and the Levant. Moreover, the French decision to break off diplomatic relations following the bombardments was, not unlike the British case, a way to underline the symbolic importance of a strong response. Roger Cambon explained his resignation and departure from London in a note to Churchill and Halifax. In it, he described hearing Churchill’s Commons speech and knowing that the events that had taken place over the last few days, and the British descriptions of them made it impossible to continue in his current position.<sup>65</sup>

Ultimately, the strategic context that developed after the French capitulation was both limiting and highly complex. Britain needed to demonstrate its resolve to continue the war, yet was in no position to place boots on the ground in a direct assault against the Germans. Action against the fleet was one of the few options available at the time and it was mobilised to serve a highly symbolic purpose in addition to strategic considerations. The metropolitan French government was likewise in a tenuous situation. It had to respond to the attacks in a manner that would confirm its newfound position as a non-belligerent, avoid German reprisals in the unoccupied zone and attempt to strengthen its own legitimacy both at home and abroad. In both countries many

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<sup>62</sup> Baudouin to Berne, 5 July 1940, 3P102, Dossier 3, Service Historique de la Defense, [Henceforward SHD].

<sup>63</sup> Baudouin to French Diplomatic Posts, 6 July 1940, 10GMII/336, MAE.

<sup>64</sup> Incoming telegrams to Baudouin from diplomatic posts, 9 July 1940, 10GMII/336, MAE.

<sup>65</sup> Cambon to Baudouin, 5 July 1940, 10GMII/291, MAE.

of the official statements that were issued after Mers el-Kébir not only appeared, but also were greatly elaborated upon throughout the press.

### **Going to Press: French and British Responses**

The themes that emerged or echoed official statements in both the British and the Vichy press after the Mers el-Kébir bombardments evoked images that would become familiar throughout the war. This long-term rhetorical continuity illustrates the importance of the role that Catapult played as a watershed moment in the Anglo-French relationship. Or more specifically, how the Anglo-French relationship was portrayed throughout the mass media. In particular, popular opinion and the press within Britain were marked by resolute support for those military operations that they viewed as moving in the direction of ultimate victory. The moral dilemma of violence, and specifically civilian death appeared to be less important and indeed easily justifiable within the broader context of the war. The British press, and specifically *The Times* and *The Guardian* routinely vindicated and even praised the action taken towards the French fleet. We have already addressed the argument of inevitability, which played a leading role in official explanations of the operations. This feeling of inevitability was even more evident within the British press. Indeed, what made it unique was the heightened sense of historic nostalgia and emotive language. Churchill himself took on an important role in the media, not as a policy maker, but as a heroic and historically significant figure. The Vichy French press, much like Baudouin's press releases, sought to re-assert France's status as a sovereign nation with a great empire. British "aggressions" were immoral. However, they were also consistent with the British attitude during the present conflict, in which France was portrayed as having shouldered the entire burden of the war effort, and in this sense were unsurprising.

#### British Press Responses

On 5 July Cambon summarised the response to Mers el-Kébir across the British press: "The English press is unanimous in approving the decision of the British government to seize the French fleet by force."<sup>66</sup> Within the British metropole, the vast majority of press commentary on Catapult appeared between 5 and 6 July. Many articles used Churchill's Commons address as the basis for their

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<sup>66</sup> Cambon to Baudouin, 5 July 1940, 10GMII/336, MAE.

description and analysis of the fleet operations, an understandable approach given the limited availability of first hand information. Most notably, however, the tone and language of stories in both newspapers deliberately employed historic imagery and symbolic references, which suggested that Churchill's position as a great statesman was already assured. An article in *The Guardian* by the political correspondent described the reception to Churchill's speech, "One liked to think there was a cloud of unseen witnesses, not strangers to Westminster either, nor untried in ordeals of England wishing the Commons' House well in this moment of destiny – Pym and Hampden, Walpole and Chatham, Fox, Burke, Pitt, Wellington and Gladstone. For of what was Mr Churchill speaking – "The eve of battle for our native land.""<sup>67</sup> Using highly emotive ideas such as "destiny" and conjuring up triumphant historical figures did more than vindicate Churchill's actions. These tactics further implied that victory itself was simply a matter of time. The article went on to say that after the speech, "...the cheers were loud and sustained, and one particularly noticed Mr Chamberlain foremost in the demonstration waving his order papers."<sup>68</sup> This imagery described the symbolic passing of power to Churchill, who although had been named Prime Minister in May, had yet to receive the full approval of the House and the British citizenry. On 7 July the *Observer* reported during a discussion of his speech "He took his place with the greatest of our historic men. He ranked with Cromwell and Chatham."<sup>69</sup> What can be seen within these articles was a deliberate choice to portray Churchill, not as a politician who had backed the right policy, but to mark this decision as the one that had vaulted him to historic greatness. This was despite the fact that the battle was in fact, just beginning.

*The Times* also featured high praise for Churchill. The highest commendations were linked to his speech and its thunderous reception. "It is not often that the House is so deeply moved. The Prime Minister's speech matched a theme which had the qualities of a Greek tragedy, and it will live as one of the most memorable in the history of Parliament."<sup>70</sup> Another article described the reaction to his address: "...and the whole House rose to cheer loudly and with a

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<sup>67</sup> Our Political Correspondent, "Commons Scene: Prime Minister's Moving Speech," *The Guardian*, July 5, 1940, 5.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> J.L.G., "The French Fleet: The Soul of Tragedy," *Observer*, 7 July 1940, 6.

<sup>70</sup> Parliamentary Correspondent, "Commons Emotion; Whole-Hearted Approval of Decision," *The Times*, 5 July 1940, 4.

note of fierce resolve his declaration that the war should be prosecuted with the utmost vigour until the righteous purposes for which we entered upon it had been in all respects fulfilled.”<sup>71</sup> Churchill became, in these depictions, not just a successful orator, but the embodiment of British resolve in the on going war. Why was Churchill portrayed in this way? I argue that the embodiment of Churchill as a national hero reflected a broad public sentiment that both demanded and subsequently rewarded decisive action in the continuing prosecution of the war. Mass Observation research carried out on 5 July in the London districts of Chalk Farm, Limehouse, and Hampstead found support for the bombardments (although some respondents had yet to hear of the event) with animosity aimed at the French leadership rather than the French people. One fifty-year-old female commented, “I think it’s a damn good thing. Don’t you?”<sup>72</sup> While a few respondents displayed open hostility towards the French and even understanding for the Germans, these responses were rare and likely to be motivated by individual beliefs, rather than in direct response to Mers el-Kébir. Importantly, this elevation of Churchill throughout the press was not always mirrored in public opinion studies. Mass Observation responses included only one direct reference to Churchill’s apparently superior leadership.<sup>73</sup> The success of actual operations themselves appeared to be more important than the man or men behind them. The apparent discrepancy between the exorbitant praise for Churchill in the press and the more calculated response found by Mass Observation analysts is itself an interesting point that could be expanded upon after further research. In any case, what is clear in both these sources was the substantial agreement that Somerville’s decision to fire had been the correct one.

What was not mentioned in the broadsheet press was the possibility of open conflict with France. This concern was, however present in individual responses to the operations. A thirty-five-year-old female from North London commented that *The Evening Standard* hinted, “that Petain may declare war on England.”<sup>74</sup> Other respondents expressed a similar worry. However, neither *The*

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<sup>71</sup> “Peace ‘Whispers’ Repudiated; Prime Minister’s Ovation,” *The Times*, 5 July 1940, 4.

<sup>72</sup> The French Navy, 5 July 1940, SxMOA1/2/25/2/G/1, Mass Observation Archives, [Henceforward MOA].

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.



*Times* nor *The Guardian* speculated upon this possibility. Both papers focused upon showing, again, the tragic inevitability of the bombardments. In *The Times*, the “tragic necessity” of events at Mers el-Kébir was confirmed by the unity with which the Commons supported the outcome.<sup>75</sup> The same sentiment was echoed in *The Guardian*. Under the subheading “No Alternative” an article discussed the positive reaction of the Commons to Churchill’s speech. “Heartrending it was, but let there be no mistake about it: the House to a man and with swelling cheers approved the cruel necessity. There was no alternative.”<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, facts such as the death toll of French naval personnel were conspicuously absent from these reports.

Likewise, *The Guardian* was hardly subtle in discussing the unavoidability of the bombardments. “The need for silence about the French fleet in the past fortnight will now be apparent to everyone. The most strenuous efforts have been made by the Government to avoid the painful, but ultimately inevitable use of force against a recent ally...”<sup>77</sup> A total of twelve articles concerning the fleet were published in the 5 July edition, eclipsing all other topics. Articles drew up a clear argument for readers to follow. They referenced the positive global reaction to the bombardments as proof that this was the best course of action to take. “It is universally agreed that Britain’s action was made unavoidable. Britain, it is recognized fully, was not in a position to incur further dangers to the cause which is also that of France.”<sup>78</sup> The press also justified the uniquely violent outcome at Mers el-Kébir as compared to the other ports. An article in *The Times* entitled “British Action at Oran” cited the ease of the British takeover of French ships in British ports as evidence of how effortlessly the Germans could have taken over ships in other French ports.<sup>79</sup> On a whole, the press engaged only minimally with the simultaneous operations that were undertaken in British

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<sup>75</sup> “Commons Emotion, Whole-Hearted Approval,” *The Times*, 5 July 1940, 5.

<sup>76</sup> Our Political Correspondent, “Commons Scene: Prime Minister’s Moving Speech,” *The Guardian*, 5 July 1940, 5.

<sup>77</sup> Naval Correspondent, “Anxious Days at the Admiralty: Future of the French Units,” *The Guardian*, 5 July 1940, 5.

<sup>78</sup> Diplomatic Correspondent, “France and British Seizure of Ships,” *The Guardian*, 5 July 1940, 2.

<sup>79</sup> “British Action at Oran,” *The Times*, 5 July 1940, 4.

ports and at Alexandria. Not until 8 July was tentative success reported on the demobilisation of ships at Alexandria.<sup>80</sup>

There was another theme that was present throughout the British press: American approval. This is not surprising given its earlier prominence within War Cabinet discussions. It too, however, was symptomatic of the very public expectation that American intervention would be forthcoming. *The Guardian* ran an article containing statements from several American senators and newspapers, all of which applauded the tenacity of British action towards the fleet. The article commenced by saying, "Britain was completely justified in attacking the French fleet at Oran. This is the general feeling in naval quarters in Washington."<sup>81</sup> Between 5-6 July four articles reiterated American opinion towards the actions against the French fleet. They drew upon the statements of not only the American government but also the response of the American population. "Mr Churchill's speech today in the House of Commons was fully reported on the American wireless and has created a profound impression here. There is no doubt that the people of the United States wholly understand and sympathise with the necessities which compelled Great Britain to attack the fleet of her late Ally."<sup>82</sup> One article consisted almost entirely of direct quotes taken from *The New York Times*, *The New York Herald Tribune*, and *The Baltimore Sun*. This study of the American press concluded, "American sympathy is overwhelmingly with Great Britain in her action against the French Fleet."<sup>83</sup>

The press also praised Churchill's distinction between the French population and their leadership. Editorial commentary suggested that official speeches on this topic were being followed and discussed. A key article in *The Guardian*, for example blamed the bombardments on the Bordeaux leadership and Gensoul's general lack of character.

From what I know of Admiral Gensoul, he must have been completely under the thumb of his Bordeaux masters. He was reactionary in his political views and was regarded in naval quarters as unimaginative,

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<sup>80</sup> "Gibraltar Raid: Made by French Planes; Vichy Statement; Warships Demobilised at Alexandria?" *The Guardian*, 8 July 1940, 5.

<sup>81</sup> "Britain Right: Washington View of Oran Battle," *The Guardian*, 5 July 1940, 2.

<sup>82</sup> "American Approval," *The Guardian*, 5 July 1940, 5.

<sup>83</sup> "American Views on Attack on French Fleet: Overwhelming Support for Britain," *The Guardian*, 6 July 1940, 9.

unenterprising and scarcely intelligent. It was this “dull dog” ... who gave the ghastly order to his men to go and fight the British.<sup>84</sup>

The article went on to comment upon the “abyss which the battle of Oran has revealed between the Bordeaux Government and the common people of France...”<sup>85</sup> In *The Times* the caption under a photo of Gensoul read, “Admiral Gensoul in command of the French Fleet at Oran. He refused to adopt any of the honourable alternatives offered by the British Government.”<sup>86</sup>

Like the media reactions to Churchill’s speech, these articles invoked historic themes to create sympathy for metropolitan France. “It is difficult to believe that the French people, with all of their proud history behind them, can be content to become a vassal state, lending their ancient prestige to the very forces that Revolutionary France and Catholic France have combined in denouncing as a new barbarism.”<sup>87</sup> J. Nicholson Balmer applauded this distinction in a letter to the editor. He wrote, “Sir, - No reasonable person questions the wisdom of the decision of the Government of Britain in the grim choice set before it at Oran and we welcome the distinction drawn between the French nation and its Fascist Government.”<sup>88</sup> Here, history was used with the intent of provoking a kind of nostalgia or sense of pride for the past. This selective use of history was particularly interesting given that the Anglo-French relationship itself had such an acrimonious foundation. Indeed, *The Times* cited the 1807 British seizure of the Portuguese and Danish fleets as a defensive measure against Napoleonic invasion as justification for the current operations at Mers el-Kébir. “From the supreme crises of our history we have always emerged with spirit purged and ennobled.”<sup>89</sup> Later, we will see how the Vichy press drew on this more troubled side of the Franco-British relationship to make a case against Anglo-Free French imperial incursions.

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<sup>84</sup> Former Paris Correspondent, “Cost of Bordeaux Cabinet’s Illusions: What was Admiral Darlan’s Part?” *The Guardian*, 5 July 1940, 2.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Photo of Gensoul, *The Times*, 5 July 1940, 6.

<sup>87</sup> “Britain and France,” *The Guardian*, 5 July 1940, 4.

<sup>88</sup> J. Nicholson Balmer, Letter to the Editor, “The French Fleet,” *The Guardian*, 9 July 1940, 2.

<sup>89</sup> “A Tragic Necessity,” *The Times*, 6 July 1940, 5.

### French Press Responses

In an ironic turn of events, on 3 July as Admiral Somerville was squaring off against Admiral Gonsoul, *Le Temps* published a celebratory story entitled “The French Navy.” The article looked back on the 1921 naval conference in Washington, after which the French navy had received greater recognition in the press and amongst the public. It was lauded for the traditional strategic importance of Oceanic naval forces and their links to the empire. French naval policy was, “in spite of political fluctuations and unceasing changes of government...worthy of a great country and its global empire.”<sup>90</sup> This publication, just prior to the public rupture of Anglo-French diplomatic relations, did not hold up the fleet solely as a military asset. It depicted it as an essential part of the French nation and her empire. The fleet, moreover, was portrayed as the thread of continuity linking the at times tumultuous French political scene. Now, its retention by Pétain’s government made the fleet more important than ever.

After the bombardments, it was not surprising that the French press unanimously described the violence at Mers el-Kébir as unjustifiably aggressive. The French position, furthermore, was depicted as honourable while British actions were considered dishonest and unsportsmanlike. These arguments asserted the right of the new French government to withdraw into ostensible neutrality. What follows is a discussion of these main press themes, including how word choice impacted the tone of the message. Compared to the previous analysis of the British press, this section will be much shorter because the themes in question were very straightforward and highly repetitive. Many of the articles, in fact were simply reprinted official statements.

The most prevalent theme running through the French press was the odiousness of the British “aggressions.” The official government communiqué, which was broadcast on the evening of 4 July, appeared in print the following day, as did Prouvost’s letter to the American press. Both the official commentary and material written by press correspondents unreservedly condemned the attacks. The articles described Force H and the British government more broadly as “the aggressors” while the operations at Mers el-Kébir were depicted as “the aggression, the crime, the

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<sup>90</sup> “La Marine Française,” *Le Temps*, 3 July 1940, 1.

attack and the hostilities.” In addition, many articles described the operations as an “ambush.”<sup>91</sup> This had the effect of making British actions appear at least petty and at worst immoral. The French, both as a government and a nation, on the other hand, were portrayed as victims of British violence. Worse, Britain had acted despite numerous French guarantees that all precautions had been taken to make certain that the fleet would be protected from German designs. After Churchill’s Commons statement, Baudouin published a tell-all piece, in which he examined the state of Anglo-French relations since the outbreak of war in 1939. He argued that since 1920, France had put in all the effort to mobilise forces for the upcoming battle, while the British had hoarded men and material to protect itself. Because of this, the French people had borne alone the suffering that should have been the common cause of “two people.”<sup>92</sup> This line of reasoning was not altogether inaccurate. Martin Alexander has argued convincingly that throughout the phoney war Whitehall remained “obsessed with a vision of the onset of war that came straight from H.G. Wells. ...the shape of things to come admitted only the flattening of industries and cities – and British ones at that.”<sup>93</sup> Coupled with the British obsession with the spectre of the air war in Britain, there was a culture of overconfidence within the service ministries aimed at French military capabilities.<sup>94</sup> Still, this French narrative of victimhood was important because it stressed that metropolitan France remained a sovereign nation with a legal government – not an occupied state. It was also a way to demonstrate to the armistice commission Vichy’s integrity and willingness to abide by the rules laid out in the armistice. Pétain’s government, the press reported on 6 July, had

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<sup>91</sup> “Rupture des Relations Diplomatiques entre la France et l’Algèleterre,” *Le Temps*, 5 July 1940, 2. “Précisions Officielles sur le Guet-Apens de Mers el-Kébir,” *L’Echo d’Alger*, 5 July 1940, 1.

<sup>92</sup> “Les Rapports Franco-Britanniques depuis le Début des Hostilités: Exposé de M. Baudouin,” *Le Temps*, 6 July 1940, 1. “M. Baudouin Fait l’Exposé des Relations Franco-Anglaises depuis le Début des Hostilités,” *L’Echo d’Alger*, 7 July 1940, 1.

<sup>93</sup> Martin S. Alexander, “‘Fighting to the Last Frenchman’? Reflections on the BEF Deployment to France and the Strains in the Franco-British Alliance,” in *The French Defeat of 1940: Reassessments*, ed. Joel Blatt (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1998), 300.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

requested greater leverage to use air and naval forces to protect French territory.<sup>95</sup>

French victimhood, when contrasted with British hostility also promoted the idea of French honour. The armistice itself was portrayed as demanding but honourable. Likewise, the actions taken by Gensoul in refusing to accept the ultimatum were “heroic” and taken in defence of French honour.<sup>96</sup> Broadly speaking, the image presented through official statements and reiterated throughout the press distanced the metropole and the empire from the on going war. They did so by constantly restating how aggressive, unjustifiable, unexpected and dishonourable British actions were. These same themes will re-emerge time and time again as British and Free French forces clashed with Vichy throughout the empire. In this instance, Vichy’s statements did not mention de Gaulle’s rival forces. Indeed, calling attention to his presence would only complicate Vichy’s claims as the sole representative of French interests. Similarly, because so much of the international press was sympathetic to the British cause, Baudouin was unable to assert, as Churchill had done, that he had received any significant support outside of the metropole. By 9 July, discussions of the bombardments were fading from the press. A final account from New York described the American reaction as one of “painful surprise” but admitted that the press was not condemning British actions.<sup>97</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown that on both sides of the Channel rhetoric was deployed as a strategic tool of both domestic and foreign policy. For Britain, it was intrinsic to the policy-making process. The War Cabinet used the metropolitan press, diplomatic reports and intelligence reports to conclude that action against the fleet was likely to receive support among the majority of the British public and American officials. Senior figures in the Admiralty then used this information to write and revise numerous carefully crafted press statements and broadcasts. Studying these communications

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<sup>95</sup> “Dernières Nouvelles,” *Le Temps*, 6 July 1940, 2.

<sup>96</sup> “L’Agression Britannique de Mers el-Kébir,” *Le Temps*, 7 July 1940, 1.

<sup>97</sup> “Après l’Agression de Mers el-Kébir,” *Le Temps*, 9 July 1940, 1. “L’Affaire de Mers el-Kébir Provoque en Amérique une Douloureuse Surprise,” *L’Echo d’Alger*, 9 July 1940, 1.

highlights the value of Catapult not only as a strategic military operation but even more so as a symbolic declaration of absolute determination to carry on the war. The violence of the bombardments was justified using language that promised ultimate victory. These promises were further justified through references to heroic victories in the past. Within these depictions, France played the role of a beleaguered nation under the thumb of both Germany and the defeatist Pétain government. Its only chance to overcome this domination was through British victory and rescue. At the same time, international, and particularly American approval or criticism of the choice to fire on the French fleet was something that British and French leadership were both eager to gain. British press statements, Churchill's Commons address and corresponding press articles all drew on the idea of American support. In fact, they cited examples of American backing as a way to justify overall policy towards the fleet.

French criticism of British policy towards France's naval forces did not gain much international recognition apart from a few nations such as Bulgaria and Turkey. Foreign Minister Baudouin made concerted efforts to gain international approval, issuing instructions to overseas representatives to promote sympathy for the French as victims of a British attack. However, even he recognised the paucity of international support for this version of events. Nevertheless, French rhetoric after Mers el-Kébir is instructive because it lays the groundwork for much of what would be written over the next two years, prior to the total occupation of the metropole late in 1942. The themes that were present in Baudouin's communiqués and Pétain's statements were part of a larger narrative that attempted to preserve French interests and French sovereignty in the aftermath of a devastating defeat and armistice. At the heart of many French publications was the assertion that, despite British claims, Pétain's government was the only true representative of French interests. Equally importantly, Pétain and his government were asserting their positions as members of a neutral nation in the current conflict. French rhetoric in the wake of Mers el-Kébir revolved around one core image: the British as aggressors against the French nation. The word 'aggression' or variations of it appeared repeatedly throughout official statements and the press. Moreover, via the mass media, Baudouin suggested that French neutrality was brought on by Britain's failure (or

perhaps refusal) to build up sufficient arms and men for the European struggle. They preferred to barricade themselves on their island, hoarding materials for their own defensive stand, he claimed.

Clearly, the events at Mers el-Kébir held major significance for both sides. In the coming weeks and months, the bombardments would fade from British memory, if not the French. Indeed, in the French case the bombardments would be referred to again through the media and in propaganda materials. By late September a British memorandum would describe the impact of Mers el-Kébir on the Anglo-French relationship as, “a period of intense suspicion and anti-British feeling gradually readjusting itself to the present attitude, which is the maintenance of the status quo.”<sup>98</sup> However, what remained was the positivity and praise that greeted the event, both within Britain and amongst its target audience of the United States government and people. The rhetorical portrayal of operation Catapult served to bolster both of these forces, building up a dialogue of inevitability and certainty within a wartime context of great uncertainty and even doubt. On the French side, it laid the foundation for what would be described as a string of violations of French sovereignty, neutrality and honour.

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<sup>98</sup> Enclosure II, “War With Vichy Government, Memorandum by the Middle East Joint Planning Staff,” 27 September 1940, CAB 84/23, TNA.



## Chapter 5: Justifying Military Failure at Dakar, September 1940 “A Glaring Example of Miscalculation, Confusion, Timidity and Muddle”<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Writing in 1943, historian Emil Lengyel emphasised the strategic importance of Dakar (and the French empire in Africa more generally) in deciding the current conflict. The overtly racist and imperialist tones of the book prop up a broader argument that depicts France’s colonial presence in Africa as both a bulwark against Germany and a source of revitalising power. “Africa was a *raison d’être* of French imperialism.”<sup>2</sup> Lengyel believed that Britain should have taken over the Senegalese port city of Dakar, federal capital of the French West African federation, immediately following the French defeat in June 1940, rather than waiting until September. This strategic argument is situated rather uncomfortably beside praise for the famed humanity of French colonial administration and unflattering comparisons between French and British imperial rule. While the British are fair and treat local populations well, he argues, they are cold and impersonal. However, within the French empire, “the natives can warm to the French, for whom they feel affinity and attraction. The sunny disposition of the Frenchman is ingratiating, and the native too likes to laugh.”<sup>3</sup> Alice Conklin has argued that French policy-makers employed a “civilising logic,” or justificatory rhetoric based upon liberal values that made French colonialism “as much a state of mind as it was a set of coercive practices and system of resource extraction.”<sup>4</sup>

These depictions of two contrasting imperial approaches illustrate an important issue of periodization. This was the imperial mind-set prevalent at the time, one that weighed not only the material and strategic features of a region, but also linked the very idea of empire to national greatness. It was this symbolic importance of empire, manifested through rhetoric, which became for Vichy a vital source of legitimacy. Ruth Ginio argues, “In ‘normal’ circumstances

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<sup>1</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 2, *Their Finest Hour* (London: Cassell, 1949), 437.

<sup>2</sup> Emil Lengyel, *Dakar: Outpost of Two Hemispheres* (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1943), 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 248.

no empire had ever pleaded for its subjects' loyalty and legitimacy was quite irrelevant. Now, suddenly, France's colonial subjects were no longer taken for granted."<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Desmond Dinan stresses that despite the lack of strategic or economic value of de Gaulle's newly acquired territories in French Equatorial Africa (AEF), this territory was hugely important both symbolically and psychologically for the legitimacy of the fledgling movement.<sup>6</sup> The conflict that erupted between the Anglo-Free French and Vichy forces at Dakar between 23 and 25 September 1940 was the first of several Franco-British battles for colonial territory. The operation was complex. Strategically, Dakar was a naval base and commercial port with the best harbour facilities in West Africa between Casablanca and Cape Town, as well as a modern airfield.<sup>7</sup> Being defeated here would have direct effects both in the loss of strategically valuable territory and in the twin blows to de Gaulle's prestige and that of his British patrons. The latter, in particular, needed to maintain the image of solidarity and strength that had been achieved at Mers el-Kébir three months earlier. Issues of prestige, or perhaps more appropriately, face saving, made up a core component of this operation, from the planning process to its eventual justification. Specifically, War Cabinet personnel were ultimately much more reticent about carrying on with the operation. Their estimations, of the potential political fallout both in the form of criticisms at home and a loss of prestige in the eyes of the metropolitan French and American populations, attached greater repercussions to failure than pure military estimations. Thus, the official response, insofar as there was one, particularly in the early days, consisted largely of Free French rhetoric.

Events were further complicated by tension between the British government and the new Free French movement. The former carefully situated themselves as supporters of de Gaulle while simultaneously withholding agency from the movement in regards to foreign policy formulation and the running of the war. Ultimately, however, British attempts to subtly shift the blame for the failed operation to de Gaulle were unsuccessful. Dinan has argued that both the

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<sup>5</sup> Ruth Ginio, *French Colonialism Unmasked, the Vichy Years in French West Africa* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), xiv.

<sup>6</sup> Desmond Dinan, *The Politics of Persuasion: British Policy and French African Neutrality, 1940-42* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 56.

<sup>7</sup> Barnett Singer and John Langdon, *Cultured Force: Makers and Defenders of the French Colonial Empire* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 235.

press and public opinion within Britain unanimously blamed de Gaulle for failing to capture Dakar.<sup>8</sup> However, the following analysis challenges this argument. The British press called for *parliamentary* explanations, a point that demonstrated the extent to which large sections of the population believed that de Gaulle's movement lacked any substantial autonomy. The following sections will look in turn at the planning phase of the operations before turning to the attempts to justify the ultimate failure to capture Dakar. Similarly to the bombardments at Mers el-Kébir, the British mass media as well as Ministry of Information (MOI) and Foreign Office intelligence reports tended to interpret the operation through a unique framework of wartime morality. This was especially notable in the competing narratives of the popular press and the officially sanctioned press releases. Classic conceptions of a "just" war consider "the use of armed force as an instrument of public authority in the service of the common good...."<sup>9</sup> Free French justifications of the withdrawal from Dakar stressed peacetime ideals of empathy for the local population and a desire to avoid risking heavy casualties. The popular press throughout Britain criticised both of these arguments on the grounds that they were inconsistent with ideas of victory, which both necessitated and permitted violent acts that would remove obstacles along the way. What will become increasingly clear throughout this chapter is the complexity of nascent Anglo-Gaullist relations, both real and rhetorically constructed, within a context that remained uncertain throughout autumn 1940.

In the closing months of 1940, the British embassy in Madrid served as a covert back-channel to maintain communication between Britain and Vichy. Despite this evident willingness on the part of the British government to maintain some ties with Vichy, more significant was Britain's refusal to publically acknowledge either the legality or the legitimacy of Pétain's government. At every turn, British political leaders considered how material actions would affect local and international perceptions of Britain's war effort or even broad foreign policy motives. International Relations scholar Michael Butler has argued, "...the public presentation of the war-decision should be understood as in fact, a

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<sup>8</sup> Dinan, *Persuasion*, 60.

<sup>9</sup> James Turner Johnson, *Ethics and the Use of Force: Just War in Historical Perspective* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2011), 2.

matter of vital and practical importance to the effective conduct of statecraft.”<sup>10</sup> This assertion convincingly argues that intangible factors such as morale and broad societal support are of vital importance within the policy making process.

The decision, ultimately sanctioned by the British War Cabinet, to attempt to forcibly shift the loyalty of French Senegal from Vichy to de Gaulle's Free French, precipitated a rift in Anglo-French relations. However, this crisis was also a symptom of a deeper, social and national rivalry between Vichy and the Free French in which each party attempted to publically assert itself as the legitimate representative of the French nation state. The British Chiefs of Staff (COS) had earlier argued that the Free French, as a movement that was hostile to the Pétain government, must carry out any incursions onto French colonial territory. Likewise, the War Cabinet was aware of the likelihood of an increase in Anglo-French tensions and planned accordingly. As the retaliatory bombing of Gibraltar by Vichy forces would show, the metropolitan French Government presented the colonial incursions as a crisis in Anglo-French relations, and imperial relations more specifically. At the same time, Vichy actively avoided any interpretations that acknowledged the involvement of the Free French as an autonomous strategic actor. This left Vichy and de Gaulle to engage in a rhetorical battle attempting to confirm their own representative legitimacy as rightful imperial rulers, defining empire as an obvious source of both symbolic and strategic power.

## Planning and Background

Arthur Marder's archive-based book, *Operation 'Menace', The Dakar Expedition and the Dudley North Affair*, remains the most comprehensive record of how this operation was planned and carried out.<sup>11</sup> What follows here is a brief discussion looking in more depth at the concerns voiced by key individuals in the decision-making process. They included the War Cabinet and, immediately below that, the Joint Planning Sub Committee (JPSC) and to a lesser extent de Gaulle and his lieutenants in Carlton Gardens. The JPSC in turn, provided reports and recommendations, some of which articulated the views of leaders on the ground, namely Edward Spears, General Noel Irwin and Admiral James

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<sup>10</sup> Michael J. Butler, *Selling a 'Just' War: Framing, Legitimacy, and U.S. Military Intervention* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 10.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Marder, *Operation 'Menace', The Dakar Expedition and the Dudley North Affair* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

Cunningham. Ultimately, operation Menace was dramatically reconfigured a number of times. These changes were the result of more than applying material resources to best effect. Rather, their chief variable was force composition. Ultimately, the force assembled was meant to underline both the shared British and Gaullist wish to emphasise the French character of the operation, regardless of the overwhelming British administrative and military power lurking in the background. Dakar was certainly strategically vital from a military perspective. However, what is emphasised here is its importance from the perspective of the legitimacy of the Free French movement. De Gaulle hoped to convince Governor General Pierre Boisson that continuing the struggle at the side of the Free French was the correct, and indeed moral choice.

After discussions between de Gaulle, Spears, and Churchill's valued assistant and key intelligence adviser, Major Desmond Morton, a note was circulated on 4 August proposing a mainly Free French operation to secure the occupation of Dakar.<sup>12</sup> This initial plan envisaged de Gaulle sailing from Britain on 15 August, rallying the federation of French West Africa<sup>13</sup>, occupying its capital, Dakar, and consolidating for Free France the colonies in West and Equatorial Africa.<sup>14</sup> In this original plan, Operation Scipio, de Gaulle stated clearly, "if he meets opposition from French sea, air or land forces, the whole operation will be impossible and he would in fact not consider continuing it."<sup>15</sup> The General's professed unwillingness to participate in a struggle between Frenchmen remained rhetorically consistent throughout, despite his pragmatic recognition of the need to allow British contingents to use force in case of resistance. He realised that the outcome of this attempt to gain control over Vichy colonial territory would affect broader perceptions of the Free French movement and he wished to avoid appearing to force his countrymen into his camp at the barrel of British guns. De Gaulle insisted that in case of resistance at Dakar, the Free French forces travelling with the British naval squadron

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<sup>12</sup> "History of Operation Menace prepared by the Naval Staff," 30 September 1940, PREM 3/276, The National Archives [Henceforward TNA].

<sup>13</sup> French West Africa was made up of eight colonial territories: Mauritania, Senegal, French Sudan, French Guinea, Ivory Coast, Upper Volta, Dahomey and Niger.

<sup>14</sup> "Forces Navales Françaises Libres, par Le Vice-Amiral Muselier," August 1940, AG/3(1)/251 Dossier 3, Les Archives Nationales [Henceforward AN].

<sup>15</sup> "War Cabinet Joint Planning Sub-Committee, Operation 'Menace', Note by the Secretary," 8 August 1940, CAB 84/93/25, TNA.

should attempt to establish themselves at another base: Pointe-Noire in the French Congo. The location was also strategically significant owing to its proximity to Brazzaville, the capital and governing seat of AEF. This move, he stressed, would not only be strategically valuable, but would serve to save face, a consideration that recognised the manner in which justificatory rhetoric would be sold to an “audience” of onlookers acutely sensitive to military failures.<sup>16</sup>

On 8 August the War Cabinet tasked the JPSC of the COS to prepare a plan specifically to capture Dakar, installing de Gaulle there in two possible contexts: a local welcome of the Free French leader or in face of determined resistance and the hostility of French West African forces. Notably, this plan was to proceed initially without de Gaulle’s knowledge. This approach was consistent with the broad reluctance within the British bureaucracy to lend unqualified support to a large-scale dissident French movement. Desmond Dinan, for example, has documented the indifference and at times open hostility within the service ministries towards the development of an effective Free French fighting force.<sup>17</sup> This early plan, which laid the groundwork for *Menace*, was based upon telegrams received from West Africa, which highlighting growing anti-British sentiment in Dakar as well as uncertainty regarding Boisson’s attitude. The service ministries were reluctant, therefore, to sanction an operation that they believed was likely to be met by stiff resistance.<sup>18</sup> The JPSC believed that the operation would only be successful if carried out by highly trained British forces with a viable plan of attack and the element of surprise (thus going against de Gaulle’s stated opposition to the use of force). General Irwin (military forces) and Admiral Cunningham (naval forces) were joint mission commanders. They would only give the order to land the Free French after resistance was subdued.<sup>19</sup>

By mid August, however, the JPSC had revised the operation to include more Free French elements, as had initially been envisaged. The previous, British-led plan, which incorporated a surprise landing of British troops at six beaches and only a small Free French contingent was not feasible due to

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<sup>16</sup> “Forces Navales Françaises Libres,” August 1940, AG/3(1)/251, AN.

<sup>17</sup> Dinan, *Persuasion*, 48-49.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Mangold. *Britain and the Defeated French: From Occupation to Liberation, 1940-1944* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 51.

<sup>19</sup> “Inter Service Planning Staff, Capture of Dakar, 77<sup>th</sup> Meeting,” 9 August 1940, WO 106/5192, TNA.

problems of swell.<sup>20</sup> The Vice-Chiefs of Staff (VCS), de Gaulle, Spears and Churchill met on 20 August to discuss revisions.<sup>21</sup> Ideas from this meeting formed the basis for the final version of *Menace*. In this version, de Gaulle would issue an ultimatum to the garrison at Dakar, bringing in British support only if resistance was serious. Although showing restraint at first, if determined Vichyite opposition continued, "...the British force would use all the force in their power to break down resistance. It was essential that by nightfall General de Gaulle should be master of Dakar."<sup>22</sup> De Gaulle continued to emphasise the necessity of promoting the French character of the operation and avoiding bloodshed at all costs.<sup>23</sup> The contradictions and uncertainties at this early date were striking. The prevalent belief in the JPSC and COS, that a successful operation would require a substantial use of manpower, was difficult to reconcile with real fears that the takeover would only be perceived as legitimate if the Free French were welcomed voluntarily. General Irwin had similar doubts about the operation, warning that current information showed "a marked difference" in opinions and attitudes of the Dakar garrison and population. This disparity was a severe hindrance in an operation that relied upon favourable local conditions.<sup>24</sup>

The War Cabinet gave its final approval to *Menace* on 27 August, believing that Commander Rushbrooke and Captain Poulter, liaison officers with the French in Dakar, would not be back in time to advise planners on local opinion and conditions. Although Vice Chief of the Imperial General Staff (VCIGS) Sir Robert Haining suggested postponing the operation by four weeks, the Cabinet declined.<sup>25</sup> In any case, Rushbrooke and Poulter provided intelligence on 29

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<sup>20</sup> "Operation 'Menace' Report," 19 August 1940, CAB 80/16/58, TNA. "The Dakar Operation, August and September 1940," May 1942, WO 232/13, TNA.

<sup>21</sup> "The Dakar Operation, August and September 1940," May, 1942, WO 232/13, TNA.

<sup>22</sup> "History of Operation 'Menace' prepared by the Naval Staff," PREM 3/276, TNA.

<sup>23</sup> "Memorandum by General de Gaulle on Operation 'Menace'," 19 August 1940, CAB 80/16/58, TNA.

<sup>24</sup> "Operation 'Menace', Memorandum by Major-General Irwin circulated for consideration by the Chiefs of Staff," 27 August 1940, CAB 80/17/27, TNA.

<sup>25</sup> "Operation 'Menace' Memorandum by the Vice Chief of the Imperial General Staff," 17 August 1940, CAB 80/16/53, TNA. The event was also reportedly held up a further three days due to "misbehaviour by some of the French crews." Evidently, improved messing consisting of champagne and frois grois was demanded. Additionally, the captain's mistress had disappeared and he refused

August, 2 days before the expedition sailed from Scapa, the Clyde and Liverpool. Both officers emphasised the strength of defences and the loyalty of troops to the commander of the Dakar garrison and Pétain.<sup>26</sup> The official British Admiralty recounting of the final days of August argues that despite receiving this reliable intelligence, nothing could be done because the final approval had already been given.<sup>27</sup> Contemporary arguments by Hervé Coutau-Bégarie and Claude Huan have pointed out that the operation never had much chance of success in the face of a symbolic, but nonetheless very real resistance.<sup>28</sup> Einar Ramsland, a Norwegian 3<sup>rd</sup> Officer at Dakar in the wake of the French capitulation later described the population as divided into three sections: “the pro-British, the anti-British and those who maintained a discreet silence.”<sup>29</sup> De Gaulle’s stated refusal to use force himself, but willingness to allow his British backers to do so was also inconsistent. However, both de Gaulle and the COS ultimately converged in the belief that regardless of how victory was achieved, it was vital to create a *perception of legitimacy* around the operation. Churchill himself also recognised that failure to bring Dakar onto the side of the Free French would have a negative impact upon British prestige at home, within metropolitan France and likely the United States as well. The War Cabinet devised what they saw as a credible justification to the population of Dakar: “Every endeavour would be made to secure the place without bloodshed, on the plea that an Allied force had come to prevent the Germans seizing Dakar, and to bring succour and help to the colony.”<sup>30</sup> Notably, a report completed by the JPSC just a few days later stated that German or Italian occupation of Dakar was unlikely to be successful.<sup>31</sup>

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to sail until she was found. ‘Admiralty Record Office, “Unofficial Account of Operation, Major P.R. Smith Hill, Royal Marines”, ADM 199/907, TNA.

<sup>26</sup> “The Dakar Operation, August and September 1940,” May 1942, WO 232/13, TNA.

<sup>27</sup> Captain S.W. Roskill, *The War at Sea 1939-1945*, Vol. 1, *The Defensive* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1954), 308.

<sup>28</sup> Hervé Coutau-Bégarie and Claude Huan, *Dakar 1940 La Bataille Fratricide*. (Paris: Economica, 2004), 231.

<sup>29</sup> “Dakar, Military and Political Intelligence Reports,” December 1940, WO 208/2852, TNA.

<sup>30</sup> W.M. (40) 225<sup>th</sup> Conclusions, Minute 6, Confidential Annex, 13 August 1940, CAB 65/14/21, TNA.

<sup>31</sup> “Possibility of a German or Italian Occupation of Dakar, Report by the Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee,” 17 August 1940, CAB 80/16/49, TNA.



Around 10 September the War Cabinet considered a note from COS Secretary, General Hastings Ismay. He expressed concern about the possibility of reprisals from Vichy, a risk increased in his view because a lack of secrecy was jeopardising the operation.<sup>32</sup> Although an earlier War Cabinet session had concluded that the likelihood of Vichy declaring war on the British was not very high, adverse repercussions for British colonial possessions were thought to be likely.<sup>33</sup> The Joint Planning Staff (JPS) anticipated four possible reactions: air attacks on Gibraltar and/or Malta, attack on British trade in the Atlantic by submarines, and active operations by contingents of the French Fleet.<sup>34</sup> However, between 26 and 29 August, Chad, the French Cameroons and the French Congo all rallied to the Free French. This happy outcome initially made Churchill and the COS willing to continue with the operation despite possible reprisals. After the departure of the task force, however, a separate incident threatened to derail the operation, namely the unwelcome arrival of a French squadron at Dakar.

The Consul in Tangier and the Naval Attaché in Madrid both warned London on 9 and 10 September respectively that a French squadron was set to pass through the straits of Gibraltar on the morning of 11 September. These warnings were immediately forwarded to the War Cabinet.<sup>35</sup> Admiral Dudley North, Admiral Commanding of the North Atlantic, did not detain the ships and three French cruisers and three destroyers from Toulon passed through the straits on 11 September. On enquiry, North reported that having received no further instructions following either original message, he conferred with Gibraltar-based Vice Admiral James Somerville, and they decided that as the French ships were not attempting to disguise themselves and were acting with friendly intentions, there was no reason not to let them pass. The ships were

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<sup>32</sup> "War Cabinet Joint Planning Staff, Operation 'Menace' Note by the Secretary," 10 September 1940, CAB 84/18, TNA.

<sup>33</sup> W.M. (40) 235<sup>th</sup> Conclusions, Minute 7 Confidential Annex 27, 27 August, 1940, CAB 65/14/26, TNA.

<sup>34</sup> "Implications of French Hostility Arising from Operation 'Menace', Report by the Joint Planning Staff," 10 September, 1940, CAB 80/106/3, TNA.

<sup>35</sup> "Message from Tangier Consul General," 9 September 1940, NRTH 1/3, Churchill Archives [Henceforward CA]. "Message from Naval Attaché Madrid," 10 September 1940, NRTH 1/3, CA.

allowed to pass, and North even sent a friendly message: “Bon voyage.”<sup>36</sup> In the War Cabinet, however, this event rocked the foundations of the operation. In the discussions that took place, it is possible to better understand how intangible factors such as prestige and credibility, which formed the base of later rhetorical justifications, impacted willingness to proceed with the event. The War Cabinet considered these concerns in tandem with the balance of military power at Dakar.

From an ideological perspective, the British decision to commit resources to back a Free French takeover in Dakar was closely linked to the desire to demonstrate the validity of de Gaulle’s leadership. More importantly, de Gaulle’s legitimacy was directly linked to his decision to continue the struggle on the side of the British. Arthur Marder wrote that he saw *Menace* as something of a sequel to *Oran*, a need to consolidate militarily strategic assets in the wake of the French defeat.<sup>37</sup> However, this observation overlooks the symbolic role that such operations can and do play within a wartime context. Such considerations are crucial to understanding the plethora of motivations underlying how the operation was both planned and carried out, in the War Cabinet, the Service Ministries and the Free French Headquarters at Carlton Gardens. Vichy, in constructing the idea of empire as both a strategic material asset and “a myth that was to compensate France for its defeat,” also worked to sustain this myth through active resistance to any threat.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, from the inception of *Scipio* to the finalisation of *Menace*, British policy was formulated based upon the understanding that seizing French territory resided in a different category than ensuring that the fleet didn’t fall into enemy hands. Political considerations for the Dakar operations, and indeed throughout the war, emphasised that any operation involving French colonial territory should appear to be carried out by French forces.<sup>39</sup> Avoiding accusations of imperial rivalry was one reason for this approach. Maintaining the credibility of de Gaulle’s movement as a real alternative to Pétain’s government was a second. The very real need to manage limited resources was a third. Haining was adamant during

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<sup>36</sup> “Passage of Three French Cruisers and Three French Destroyers from Toulon through the Straights of Gibraltar on 11 September 1940,” 8 December 1940, AVAR 5/4, CA.

<sup>37</sup> Marder, *Operation ‘Menace’*, vii.

<sup>38</sup> Ginio, *French Colonialism Unmasked*, 10.

<sup>39</sup> “Note on Political Considerations of Dakar Movements,” August, 1940, PREM 3/276, TNA.

the planning process that a hostile reception at Dakar would require the use of ground forces and “withdrawals from the defence of Great Britain which cannot be justified at the present time.”<sup>40</sup>

After the arrival of the squadron of French ships at Dakar, the War Cabinet cancelled the expedition on 16 September, an outcome that relieved Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs Alexander Cadogan.<sup>41</sup> “The French ships have forestalled us in Dakar, and so ‘Menace’ is off! I cannot truly say I am sorry!”<sup>42</sup> De Gaulle had earlier expressed his concern surrounding the ships to General Spears. “General de Gaulle feels that everything possible must be done to prevent the six French ships reaching Dakar or other French West African Harbour. [sic] If they reach Dakar it is most unlikely the place will surrender to him.”<sup>43</sup> However, these sentiments were contradicted by later correspondence, in which de Gaulle, Spears, Cunningham and Irwin argued that Menace should go forward as planned.<sup>44</sup> These arguments were based upon the reinforcement of Britain’s Force M by two cruisers from the South Atlantic Fleet.<sup>45</sup> Churchill recorded in his memoirs that, although he “had no doubt whatever that the enterprise should be abandoned,” the unexpected zeal showed by military leadership on the ground, caused him to change his mind.<sup>46</sup> De Gaulle himself, notwithstanding continued assertions that he would not involve himself in a fight amongst Frenchmen, agreed that if met with resistance and his troops were unable to land, British troops would use force to install him.<sup>47</sup> Churchill and the COS were both hesitant to reinstate the operation, a mood that contrasted sharply with Spears, Irwin, Cunningham and de Gaulle. Two different factors were motivating policy formation in London and at Dakar respectively: political concerns and military utility.

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<sup>40</sup> “V.C.I.G.S. Strategy,” 18 August, 1940, WO 106/5192, TNA.

<sup>41</sup> “History of Operation ‘Menace’ prepared by the Naval Staff,” PREM 3/276, TNA.

<sup>42</sup> Alexander Cadogan, *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938-1945*, ed. David Dilks (London: Cassell, 1971), 16 September, 1940.

<sup>43</sup> “Secret Message to Admiral Cunningham from General Spears,” 13 September 1940, SPRS 136, CA.

<sup>44</sup> “History of Operation Menace Prepared by the Naval Staff,” PREM 3/276, TNA.

<sup>45</sup> Roskill, *The War at Sea*, 315.

<sup>46</sup> Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, 427.

<sup>47</sup> “The Dakar Operation, August and September 1940,” May 1942, WO 232/13, TNA.

De Gaulle, although aware that excessive force could adversely affect the reputation of the Free French, believed that it was more important to achieve tangible, territorial gains and protect recent advances in Equatorial Africa.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, Cunningham and Irwin both believed that the prospect of military success made the operation attractive. On the other hand, back in London, Secretary of State for War Anthony Eden argued that de Gaulle would not have a political future if he didn't proceed with the operation and Spears argued that "the political consequences of ordering de Gaulle to abandon Menace and proceed to Duala may be serious, since...they might result in de Gaulle representing himself as abandoned by the British Government."<sup>49</sup> It is notable that these political reports and opinions were not centred upon the likelihood of military success. Instead, they anticipated how the outcome of operations at Dakar would shape intangible factors such as how neutral countries, including the United States, viewed the Anglo-Gaullist relationship. After the War Cabinet agreed to reinstate the operation, Churchill sent a telegram to President Roosevelt on 23 September. In it he wrote, "It looks as if there might be a stiff fight. Perhaps not, but anyhow orders have been given to ram it through."<sup>50</sup> The cavalier tone of the message illustrates the importance of fostering American perceptions of Britain as a capable and plucky fighter, a solid investment for American arms and eventually men. Desmond Dinan places much of the blame for Menace on Churchill, writing that his "obsessive involvement in its planning and execution was characterized by impatience, impetuosity, and a disregard for essential logical considerations."<sup>51</sup> Certainly, Churchill may have been impatient but even he had to work within the confines of the War Cabinet and its full ministerial complement. Moreover, "logical considerations" were not purely military or strategic. It will become abundantly clear that in this endeavour, just as in the bombardments at Mers el-Kébir,

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<sup>48</sup> Charles de Gaulle, *The Complete War Memoirs of Charles de Gaulle*, Vol. 1, *The Call to Honour 1940-1942*, Trans. Jonathan Griffin (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1955), 121.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. "Report on Strategy of Menace," 17 September 1940, WO 106/5192, TNA.

<sup>50</sup> Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, 432.

<sup>51</sup> Dinan, *Politics of Persuasion*, 51.

strategic operations did fulfil military targets and goals; however, they also acted more symbolically to illustrate tenacity and boost prestige.

The exchanges leading up to *Menace* being reinstated on 18 September revealed the tension that existed between the use of military force and the ability to control how these operations were perceived. Military incursions into Vichy territory had to be framed as a legitimate and publically supported *French* venture. Major General Irwin conveyed this sentiment to forces participating in the operation when he emphasised the political importance of installing de Gaulle as a leader within the broader region of French West Africa.<sup>52</sup> Sailing orders for the operation similarly emphasised the need to “make every effort clearly to establish the Free French character of your force,” partially as a way to avoid dissent from residents of Dakar, but also, arguably, to preserve the legitimacy of the operation from a broader perspective.<sup>53</sup> Crucially, concerted efforts to maintain the Free French nature of the event were more nuanced than a simple desire to legitimise de Gaulle’s movement. The British continued to foster Anglophilia within the French metropole, an endeavour that was not always supportive of the Anglo-Gaullist relationship. On 20 September the MOI expressed concern that *Menace* might irreparably damage the recent positive shift in French opinion. French journalists had reportedly said the previous night that if British ships fired on French ships again, it could end the de Gaulle movement.<sup>54</sup> A report around the same time from the British consul in Geneva passed on information from an M. Ruffin, who said he had good reasons to believe that Vichy leadership had asked the press not to attack the British so strongly.<sup>55</sup> The significance of diplomatic contacts between Vichy and Britain through Madrid in the autumn of 1940 hardly constituted any concrete agreement or relationship. However, these tentative communications were symptomatic of British willingness to entertain a broader concept of Anglo-French relations alongside the Anglo-Gaullist relationship.

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<sup>52</sup> “Operation ‘Menace’ Dakar,” 19 September 1940, ADM 202/412, TNA.

<sup>53</sup> “Sailing Orders for Dakar Operations,” 20 September 1940, SPRS 136, CA.

<sup>54</sup> W.M. (40) 255<sup>th</sup> Conclusions Minute 2 Confidential Annex, 20 September 1940, CAB 65/15/9, TNA.

<sup>55</sup> “Telegram de Consul Britannique, Geneve,” 18 September 1940, AG/3(1)/192, AN.

### Carrying Out the Operation: Force vs. Face

After being postponed for twenty-four hours, Menace was launched in the early morning hours of 23 September. Initial reports received by the War Cabinet via British operational headquarters on board the *Barham* indicated that Vichy forces were firmly resisting and that the *Cumberland* had been hit. The War Cabinet instructed the MOI to issue a statement that would encourage a framework for further discussion. Notably, the directions stressed that this statement should be issued before the Germans were able to comment upon events.<sup>56</sup> The resistance met by the Anglo-Free French force devastated plans for a smooth takeover. However, official responses, most of which were formulated by de Gaulle and issued by Carleton Gardens, showcased how important it was to both the Free French movement and their British backers to preserve an image that placed them squarely on the moral high ground. This approach again echoed representations of Catapult at Mers el-Kébir. Likewise, timing was clearly important. Being the first to publically acknowledge, and importantly, explain what had happened, contributed to the credibility of the statement. Like the Free French response, the few official British statements issued by the MOI attempted to create rather than respond to a framework for discussion.

Amidst heavy fog, from on board the *Westerland*, at 6:00 a.m. de Gaulle began to radio appeals to Dakar to join the Free French while British planes dropped pro-Allied pamphlets to the city's inhabitants. However, these messages appeared to have little effect. Batteries from the French ships *Goree Island* and *Richelieu* opened fire almost immediately after de Gaulle's unarmed negotiators attempted to land, shortly after 7:00 a.m.<sup>57</sup> Free French forces attempted at 1:38 pm. to begin landing operations at Rufisque as part of plan Charles, however fierce resistance led to its cancellation at 4:47 p.m.<sup>58</sup> De Gaulle and Cunningham lost communication early in the operation and the latter was unable to locate the transports carrying Free French troops in the heavy fog. Both factors contributed to the decision to cancel the attempted landing.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> War Cabinet 256 (40) Conclusions, 23 September 1940, CAB 65/9/18, TNA.

<sup>57</sup> "Summary of Operations 23-25 September 1940, *Westerland*," September 1940, AG/3(1)/251, Dossier 3, AN.

<sup>58</sup> "H.M.S. Ark Royal, Cedric Holland, Timeline of Operations," 29 September 1940, ADM 199/907, TNA.

<sup>59</sup> Roskill, *The War at Sea*, 317.

At 11:45 p.m. that evening Cunningham issued an ultimatum to Governor Boisson informing him that if he did not surrender the garrison by 6:00 a.m. the following morning, the British ships would have no choice but to open fire. His threat received an all too familiar rejection.<sup>60</sup> Cadogan remained sceptical, writing in his diary that evening, “‘Menace’ going none too well.”<sup>61</sup>

The morning of 24 September dawned with continued poor visibility and British naval bombardment began at 6:25 a.m.<sup>62</sup> British forces opened fire, which the Vichy garrison returned with deadly accuracy.<sup>63</sup> Disappointment was high among Free French and British personnel and Spears reported that although commanders were in favour of stopping the engagement, de Gaulle was hesitant, arguing, “in view of the ultimatum this could be taken as nothing less than an acknowledgment of complete and absolute failure.”<sup>64</sup> Faced with a “rather depressing” situation, the tension between the broad political objectives and the actual military obstacles was more evident than ever. De Gaulle in particular recognised that if the Free French were to lose all credibility, he would be hard pressed to attract followers from within metropolitan France, or recognition from the United States as a valid resistance force. Eventually, Cunningham and Irwin decided to end the bombardment and try once more the following day.

This decision, which Free French reports stressed was made jointly between themselves and the British, was no doubt difficult.<sup>65</sup> However, it was the subsequent responses and justifications surrounding these joint decisions which illustrated just how aware both partners were of the need to shape how the public responded to this military failure. Ismay reported to Spears that de Gaulle had “suggested a good temporary face saving” when he advocated telling the Dakar population that the bombardment was to cease at his request.<sup>66</sup> Goodwill, rather than a lack of military force, explained the decision to

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<sup>60</sup> Force M to Admiralty, 4.50, 24 September 1940, ADM 223/507, TNA.

<sup>61</sup> Cadogan, *Diaries*, 23 September 1940.

<sup>62</sup> Marder, *Operation ‘Menace,’* 131.

<sup>63</sup> “Summary of Operations 23-25 September 1940, Westerland,” AG/3(1)/251, AN.

<sup>64</sup> “Spears Mission Timeline of Events,” 24 September 1940, SPRS 136, CA.

<sup>65</sup> “Summary of Operations 23-25 September 1940, Westerland,” AG/3(1)/251, AN. “Report of Lieutenant Kaminker and Adjutant Desjardins, Barham,” September 23-25 1940, AG/3(1)/251, AN.

<sup>66</sup> Ismay to Spears, Secret Cipher Telegram, 24 September 1940, PREM 3/276, TNA.

withdraw. De Gaulle sought to create an image of moral accountability and altruism. He deliberately, and understandably, tried to hide the fact that his own movement was hardly an unbridled success, and that he was reliant upon the British for military means, and indeed political recognition. The same telegram stressed that when communicating the outcome of the event, "it is essential to suggest that de Gaulle's Emissaries were fired at majority wounded...that same applies British who also suffered loss before returning fire [sic]."<sup>67</sup> This approach reasserted the good intentions of the Free French, whose unarmed negotiators had suffered the indignity of being shot at as they sailed away. The British forces had returned fire only in self-defence. Oliver O'Donovan has drawn on similar attitudes in his studies on just war theory. He argues that contemporary wartime attitudes tend to envisage and portray war more broadly as an act of self-defence, rather than a punitive conflict. Engagement thus becomes an all-encompassing act of national self-defence.<sup>68</sup> As will become clear, Vichy also employed a similar model to criticise the Menace operations, but did so from the perspective of a neutral nation.

On 25 September officials at the scene of the operation and in London debated how long operations against Dakar should be maintained. A War Cabinet meeting the previous evening had found most members, including Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax, Eden and First Lord of the Admiralty Alexander, in favour of ending the conflict. However, members also discussed two related issues. First, they noted the need to address likely public agitation within Britain as a result of the French cruisers being allowed to pass through to Gibraltar. Second, members believed that Vichy's position would be strengthened by a decision to abandon the operation.<sup>69</sup> Ultimately, British forces carried out a final bombardment of Dakar between 9:00 a.m. and 9:25 a.m. that morning, before de Gaulle decided that he should go to Konakry to try and rally French Guinea. He cited real concern that French public opinion would be irreparably alienated if he were seen to engage his forces against Frenchmen.<sup>70</sup> However, as the response from the British press made clear, Menace was not, and certainly was

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *The Just War Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 22.

<sup>69</sup> W.M. (40) 258<sup>th</sup> Conclusions Minute 2 Confidential Annex, 25 September 1940, CAB 65/15/10, TNA.

<sup>70</sup> "Spears Mission Timeline of Events," 24 September 1940, SPRS 136, CA.



not perceived as, an exclusively Free French operation. The reaction of the British press was almost unanimous in demanding that the operation should have been carried through, or not attempted at all.

The close of the operation on 25 September precipitated renewed efforts to salvage the situation, at least from a rhetorical perspective. Spears immediately sent information to General Ismay (Signal G) "...suggesting a way of presenting the operation to the public."<sup>71</sup> What was notable about the press requirements that de Gaulle's circle created was the desire to maintain the benevolent nature of the operation, while pinning most of the blame on the Germans. Churchill again wrote to Roosevelt, claiming that the operation had failed because of the presence of Vichy partisans who had "gripped and held down...all friendly elements."<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, like other public communiqués, he was careful to avoid implying that Vichy had achieved any meaningful level of popular support. The Free French movement was still fragile. Strengthening its image would mean delegitimising Pétain's government. Explanations of the operations were consistent across communiqués issued by Carleton Gardens and the British Admiralty: numerous French citizens wishing to continue the fight against Germany had requested de Gaulle's presence in Dakar. These reports emphasised the ruthlessness and, by association, the immorality of the Vichy forces. While still on board the *Westerland*, Free French personnel wrote press releases, which were sent through Cunningham to the London Admiralty Offices and General Ismay for publication. In a press release that arrived in London on 24 September, de Gaulle used a "call of duty" argument to shift agency away from the Free French forces while simultaneously blaming the failure of the day's events on Vichy leaders under the thumb of the Germans: "Called to Dakar by numerous Frenchmen anxious to continue the fight at his side..."<sup>73</sup>

This excerpt justified de Gaulle's actions, not as territorial aggrandisement or aggressive confrontation, but as a natural reaction to popular cries for help. This was an explanation that most readers could identify with. Like the press publications that followed the collapse of France, those prepared by de Gaulle's team placed blame squarely on the authorities at

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, 435.

<sup>73</sup> Force M to Admiralty, 23.30, 23 September 1940, ADM 223/507, TNA.

Dakar for opening fire on defenceless emissaries. This tactic further served to legitimise his movement at the expense of Vichy officials. Lastly, in a refrain that would be repeated many times over the next few days, the communiqué argued that de Gaulle “withdrew his troops and his ships not wishing to be party to a fight between Frenchmen.”<sup>74</sup> Invoking the image of numerous “true” Frenchmen who were desperate to join the Free French allowed de Gaulle to avoid potentially unfavourable comparisons with Vichy by simply making it “un French.” Similarly, blaming the withdrawal upon German infiltration allowed de Gaulle to strip away the violence of own actions. By answering rather than anticipating a call for assistance he became a saviour, not an invader. Interestingly, these reports also attempted to turn the British contingent of the operation into a purely diplomatic force. “They [Vichy] also opened fire on British ships which were merely observing the situation and it was only after they had suffered serious casualties that the British Fleet opened fire in retaliation.”<sup>75</sup> Notably, the War Cabinet was hesitant to publish the communiqué in British papers, and only decided to do so after seeing that it had already appeared in the American press.<sup>76</sup>

From a grammatical perspective, the Free French description of events portrayed the operation in a static rather than a fluid sense, thus minimising the reality, in which each side was forced to make calculated and strategic choices over a period of time. In this way, it was easier to direct attention towards a set of motivations and subsequent outcomes, maintaining a sense of inevitability rather than agency on the part of the Free French. A 27 September cypher message from de Gaulle to AEF and specifically General de Larminat, Leclerc, and Governor of Chad, Félix Éboué illustrates this approach and was entitled “facts which should be known and repeated.”<sup>77</sup> The message contained a list of what could be described not as facts, but as justifications for both the initial action and its subsequent outcome. They are reproduced in summary form below:

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> War Cabinet 257 (40) Conclusions, 24 September, 1940, CAB 65/9/19, TNA.

<sup>77</sup> De Gaulle to Larminat, Leclerc and Éboué, 27 September 1940, SPRS 136, CA.

1. Initiation of the operation due to requests from elements within Senegal
2. Totally French in nature; the British were present only to observe
3. Following German demands, Vichy sent a squadron to Dakar, which forced the defences and arrested French partisans
4. The British opened fire only after sustaining casualties
5. The bombardment was ceased by request of de Gaulle because he was not in favour of the result it would achieve.<sup>78</sup>

Even more so than the British operations at Mers el-Kébir, there was a deep awareness of the need to present the operation as both ethically and militarily expedient.<sup>79</sup> The above description of the British role solely as an observer was a blatant lie. Nevertheless, it illustrates the extent to which de Gaulle was trying desperately to assert his own authority and political agency. In the final point, it is clear that de Gaulle hoped to imply that while military force could easily overcome the defences at Dakar, he made the strategic and humanitarian choice to withdraw to avoid further loss of life. De Gaulle continued to maintain an almost palpable concern when it came to the perceived legitimacy of his own movement, which until 10 September had only attracted 2,172 Frenchmen to join the Free French Naval Force despite early hopes for resistance within both the Naval and colonial spheres.<sup>80</sup> However, notwithstanding the best efforts of de Gaulle and the Admiralty, the following days would see strong criticism from press sources in Britain, the United States and, obviously, Vichy. Spears himself acknowledged, "...the effect of Dakar on English and American opinion has been absolutely disastrous."<sup>81</sup> Churchill's later justifications of the withdrawal as one of the "unforeseeable accidents of war" acknowledged that, to the rest of the world, the operation "seemed a glaring example of miscalculation, confusion, timidity and muddle."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Again, it is possible to see a real disinterest to engage with or distinguish between the range of sentiments within the population, particularly when it comes to local Senegalese inhabitants.

<sup>80</sup> "Organisation of Allied Naval, Army and Air Contingents," 25 September 1940, CAB 66/12/14, TNA.

<sup>81</sup> Edward Spears, "Meeting at Government House, 14.30," 1 October 1940, SPRS 136, CA.

<sup>82</sup> Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, 437.

## Press Responses

In the aftermath of the failed attempt to secure Dakar, Churchill received a telegram from Quebec from Harold Rothermere identifying what he saw as a massive gap between the press and public response: “Dakar incident ridiculously magnified by carping newspapers. Nobody in Canada or United States gives a thought to it. Every Britisher throughout world knows you are winning the war and that is all that matters.” [sic]<sup>83</sup> Rothermere identified something that was very important: the need to convince the outside world that Britain would win the war. However, information gathered by Home Intelligence (the social research arm of the MOI) and Cabinet discussions involving negative press representations contradicted this cavalier attitude. Regional information officers reported a “violent reaction to the Dakar incident” stressing that general sentiment was highly critical of the decision to back down. “To win this war we must take the gloves off and fight.”<sup>84</sup> This sentiment (the necessity of taking a tough line) echoed public responses to Mers el-Kébir, and would re-emerge again during Anglo-Free French attempts to capture the Levant states in 1941. Leo Amery, Secretary of State for the Colonies, received a letter from MP Robert Bower expressing concern in the wake of the withdrawal. “I am at the moment with a considerable part of the fleet. The feeling about Dakar is very strong. Norway all over again! It will do the Government a lot of harm unless drastic steps are taken.”<sup>85</sup>

Press releases issued by the MOI and published on 24 and 26 September illustrate concerted attempts to convince the public that British *political* involvement in Menace was minimal. The Gaullist operation, the initial press release asserted, was merely “accompanied by a British force, which will lend him full support.”<sup>86</sup> Within metropolitan Britain, German bombing was thought to have dampened public attention towards more international issues. Nevertheless, de Gaulle was deeply pained by the fallout from the failed invasions, writing in his memoirs that the American and British press blamed him for the debacle. Churchill’s outwardly supportive attitude, he argued relieved pressure from parliamentary and press sources.<sup>87</sup> However, a closer look at the British media

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<sup>83</sup> Rothermere to Churchill, No date, CHAR 2/398, Churchill Papers.

<sup>84</sup> “Reaction to Dakar and de Gaulle, Home Intelligence Weekly Reports,” 30 September-9 October 1940, INF 1/292, TNA.

<sup>85</sup> Leo Amery, Bower to Amery, 28 September 1940, AMEL 2/1/31, CA.

<sup>86</sup> “De Gaulle’s Move in West Africa,” *The Times*, 24 September 1940, 4.

<sup>87</sup> De Gaulle, *Call to Honour*, 129.

reveals that the issue of blame was far more complicated. The press did not acknowledge the operation as exclusively Free French. Moreover, I argue that blame levelled on de Gaulle was secondary. A write-up of American responses to the event concluded with a telling quote from *The New York Times*: “It would be folly for the British or their friends to minimize the probable effects of this defeat.”<sup>88</sup> The British media first blamed the British government for failing to properly plan and research the operation. On the other hand, the garrison’s resistance against Anglo-Gaullist forces was a propaganda coup for Vichy, who held it up as proof that a substantial number of French forces both believed in and were willing to fight for Pétain’s new government.<sup>89</sup> In an argument that would be played out repeatedly, Vichy rhetoric claimed that metropolitan France was a victimised and misunderstood nation, whose leaders were struggling to protect its empire from the hands of its greedy former ally. Building on these themes, what follows is a closer examination of the range of reactions to operation Menace in the British and French metropolises and amongst the rival representatives of French spirit, de Gaulle’s Free French movement and Pétain’s Vichy government.

#### A Stunned Silence: Responding to Local Criticism

During and immediately after the Dakar operations, British political circles closely followed the discussions emanating from the local press and public. The British mass media based stories on reports coming out of Vichy, which makes it possible to see how the responses on each side of the channel differed. Initial reports published in the British press on 24 September included information from Vichy claiming that British ships had shelled the port after the ultimatum was refused in addition to the initial statement from the MOI. The latter justified the attempted incursion as forestalling German plans to take over the port. The MOI statement also claimed that “friendly elements” in Dakar had requested Allied assistance.<sup>90</sup> These initial British reports generously recognised the Free French element of the operation, as titles like “De Gaulle’s Move in West Africa” and

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<sup>88</sup> Our Own Correspondent, “Americans on Dakar Adventure, A Major Blunder,” *The Times*, 27 September 1940, 4.

<sup>89</sup> Martin Thomas, *The French Empire at War 1940-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 76.

<sup>90</sup> “British Force Shelling Dakar: Vichy Report of Ultimatum,” *The Guardian*, 24 September 1940, 5.

“Operations at Dakar: How they Arose, Explanations by Free French” show.<sup>91</sup>

The press also described metropolitan French leaders as “French Hirelings” controlled by their German masters. This categorisation made it clear who was really in control of French affairs and lent further legitimacy to Free French rhetoric.

Metropolitan France as a whole was depicted as irrational and deluded, a spent force relying upon glories of the past in order to conceal the present catastrophe. *The Guardian*’s former Paris correspondent wrote, “This blissful ignorance of German and Italian plans is being assiduously cultivated by the Vichy press and wireless, which continues to talk about “our magnificent Colonial Empire.””<sup>92</sup> Still, as fighting at Dakar dragged on, British press responses frankly admitted that there was little reliable or concrete information regarding the on-going operations and that most reports were coming directly from Vichy.<sup>93</sup> At the same time, the British press began to criticise Menace in earnest around 27 September. MOI and Free French press releases alike continued to argue that de Gaulle’s original intelligence citing considerable French support for his movement in Dakar and the rest of Senegal was authentic. However, press correspondents challenged the wisdom of the operation.

*The Guardian* in particular called for fuller government explanations: “At present the causes of the blunder remain obscure. The mystery is how so great a mistake came to be made.”<sup>94</sup> The same issue also asserted that “public opinion is disturbed by the Dakar fiasco,” and is calling for a fuller statement and cross-examination of the issue in Parliament (an event which did not take place until 8 October).<sup>95</sup> Nevertheless, as noted, the significance of the withdrawal amongst the British public was likely dampened by concerns over home defence. MOI intelligence claimed that Londoners showed little interest in Dakar, being

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<sup>91</sup> “Operations at Dakar: How they Arose, Explanation by Free French,” *The Guardian*, 25 September 1940, 2. “De Gaulle’s Move in West Africa,” *The Times*, 24 September 1940, 4. “Dakar Action Continues,” *The Times*, 25 September, 1940, 4.

<sup>92</sup> Former Paris Correspondent, “Germany’s Double Game in Morocco,” *The Guardian*, 23 September 1940, 5.

<sup>93</sup> Diplomatic Correspondent, “Vichy’s Efforts to Hold Dakar,” *The Times*, 25 September 1940, 4. “De Gaulle’s Reported Ultimatum: Vichy Decides to “Defend the Colony,”” *The Guardian*, 24 September 1940, 5.

<sup>94</sup> “Dakar,” *The Guardian*, 27 September, 1940, 4.

<sup>95</sup> “Our London Correspondence: London, Thursday Night Public Opinion and Dakar,” *The Guardian*, 27 September 1940, 4.

preoccupied with nightly bombing. This attitude coincided with the opinion of the “vast masses of largely inarticulate people,” and was also comparable to MOI studies carried out earlier in the month.<sup>96</sup> Press analyses put together by the British Admiralty following the disastrous attempts to win over Boisson noted that strong criticisms of Dakar in the London press were juxtaposed against reports that praised the morale of the British people under nightly bombing raids.<sup>97</sup> At the same time that the Dakar “fiasco” was being dealt with, the MOI instructed the press to limit the publication of photos showing bomb damage in London, as this was liable to dampen public spirits.<sup>98</sup> The British population, and in particular Londoners, faced a plethora of daily issues and concerns that likely outranked the formulation of any *actionable* response to Dakar. Indeed, MP Aneurin Bevan would shortly criticise Churchill for failing to pay attention to real opinion – resentment in the East End due to a lack of deep shelters.<sup>99</sup>

This did not mean, however, that criticisms aimed at the operation were not taken seriously. Churchill in particular responded strongly to the negative press reception. Despite the abovementioned MOI reports that indicated a certain level of public disinterest in regards to the Dakar operations, Menace, remained a topic of discussion within the War Cabinet, and the fallout was monitored closely through Admiralty Home Press Summaries. The press remained important because those groups that monitored public opinion considered it to be a viable window into local and international sentiment. Prior to the decision to withdraw from Dakar, press sources across England and Scotland allocated “front and leader page splashes” to the on-going operations.<sup>100</sup> Consistent with earlier sentiments praising operation Catapult for its tenacity and resolve, none of these stories criticised the grounds of the operation. Following the 26 September announcement that the Dakar expedition would be suspended, the press maintained this same line, arguing for non-compromise in the very much British war effort.

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<sup>96</sup> “Reaction to Dakar and de Gaulle, Home Intelligence Weekly Reports,” 30 September-9 October 1940, INF 1/292, TNA. “What the Public is Asking No. 3,” 7 September 1940, INF 1/283, TNA.

<sup>97</sup> Home Press Summaries, 27 September 1940, ADM 1/10321, TNA.

<sup>98</sup> War Cabinet 255 (40) Conclusions, 20 September 1940, CAB 65/9/17, TNA.

<sup>99</sup> Richard Toye, *The Roar of the Lion* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), 75.

<sup>100</sup> Home Press Summaries, 24 September 1940, ADM 1/10321, TNA.

Notwithstanding de Gaulle's insistence that to continue would mean entering at best a morally ambiguous (and consequently difficult to justify) zone involving a fight between Frenchmen, the overwhelming majority of British press sources emphasised two key points. First, despite efforts to portray the British as having played only a supporting role, the press called for explanations from Parliament and the War Cabinet, not from de Gaulle.<sup>101</sup> Second, the operation, and crucially, the decision to withdraw, was largely seen as a failure, despite official arguments underlining the ethical justifications for backing down. Oliver O'Donovan has argued in a theoretical approach to war that being able to access heroic courage is an important part of the combat situation. Included in this ability is a cache of characteristics including "self-master, decisive action and contempt for death."<sup>102</sup> Withdrawal, in the case of Dakar, violated core concepts of how wars are fought and won. Namely, achieving a rightful victory allowed for the temporary normalisation of extraordinary conditions including the extension and legitimisation of government force outside traditional zones of sovereignty.<sup>103</sup> Churchill's private secretary, John Colville, noted in his diary that criticism for the debacle in Dakar was strong in both local and American papers.<sup>104</sup> Even *The Times*, the least critical of the papers, published an article arguing that the British should not have undertaken the task unless it had enough forces to see it through. This created a sense of distrust between the public and its political leadership that had not been felt since the fall of Chamberlain's government.<sup>105</sup> The *Mirror* was especially critical, writing, "Where is Parliament these days? The nation has a right to the truth concerning this lamentable fiasco which suggests that we are still in the stage of gross miscalculation, muddled dash and hasty withdrawal, wishful thinking and half-measures."<sup>106</sup>

The War Cabinet was correct in thinking that operations in Dakar would adversely affect British prestige. Arguably, both the COS and the War Cabinet as a whole underestimated the extent to which Free French actions were considered to be subordinate to British controls. The conflict was a British conflict. Messages that attempted to justify failure by citing altruistic or humanitarian factors

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<sup>101</sup> Home Press Summaries, 25 September, 1940, ADM 1/10321, TNA.

<sup>102</sup> O'Donovan, *The Just War Revisited*, 4.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>104</sup> John Colville, *Wartime Diaries*, 27 September, 1940, CLVL 1/3, CA.

<sup>105</sup> Our own correspondent, "Americans on Dakar Adventure," *The Times*, 27 September 1940, 4.

<sup>106</sup> Home Press Summaries, 27 September, 1940, ADM 1/10321, TNA.



contradicted definitions of war based on hard work, sacrifice, and commitment. When planning for the bombardments at Mers el-Kébir, we know that the War Cabinet sanctioned extensive press releases, which responded to a number of possible outcomes. Prior to the Dakar excursion, neither Carlton Gardens nor the MOI sufficiently considered or prepared for the likelihood of outright failure. Failure made it impossible to convince the British public and mass media that withdrawing from Dakar rather than pursuing the fight was the correct choice. Churchill's popularity was slightly damaged after the Dakar operations, and a censor wrote "Whereas in June people seemed to feel that only Churchill stood between them and disaster, now the ordinary people of England have shown that they too could play just as stubborn and important a part."<sup>107</sup>

### Competing Legitimacies and National Identity

The Dakar operations also stoked hostilities between the Free French and the Vichy government, this time over national legitimacy. Both sides leveraged broad ideals of national identity in an attempt to discredit one another. Radio transmissions from the BBC Daventry transmitter in Britain to France reminded listeners that de Gaulle was the grandson of the famed Marshal Foch. They depicted the authorities of Dakar as weak men under the orders of German oppressors, descendants of the thieves who first stole Alsace Lorraine.<sup>108</sup> Falling in line with earlier depictions after the collapse of France more than three months earlier, the British press continued to stress the illegitimacy of the Vichy government, and its alienation from the rest of the nation. Vichy, argued one article in *The Guardian*, was "helpless" and totally under Hitler's control, largely deluded into thinking that by acting submissively, it would gain real concessions.<sup>109</sup> Vichy communiqués were also familiar. They reiterated the response to the July fleet bombardments, describing France as a victim of aggression. France, one Vichy wireless report argued, "is the victim of a fresh aggression on the part of England. The cowardly and bloody attack at Mers el Kébir (Oran) is being repeated at Dakar."<sup>110</sup> Propaganda posters portrayed the

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<sup>107</sup> "Dakar and de Gaulle," 14 October-21 October 1940, INF 1/292, TNA.

<sup>108</sup> Daventry, "Honneur et Patrie Voice la France Libre," 25 September 1940, 10GMII/338, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, [Henceforward MAE].

<sup>109</sup> "The French Empire," *The Guardian*, 26 September 1940, 4.

<sup>110</sup> "Bitterness of Vichy: The Dakar Action," *The Guardian*, 27 September 1940, 2.

violence at Mers el-Kébir and Dakar side-by-side asking, “where else will Britain spill French blood?”<sup>111</sup>

British and Vichy official responses in the form of press releases and radio transmissions attempted to affiliate the event with de Gaulle and the British respectively. More specifically, these depictions alternately claimed that Pétain or de Gaulle was the authentic representative of France and her overseas empire. William Hitchcock has rightly pointed out that one of the fundamental questions of Vichy was, “could it be that one could serve one’s country yet defy its allies?”<sup>112</sup> This question underlay much of both Vichy and Free French rhetoric, and, arguably, limited British abilities to publically criticise de Gaulle for fear of delegitimising their chosen representative. Behind this rhetorical blame game were clear motivations on the part of each of the three actors (Britain, Vichy and the Free French) to either associate or disassociate itself from the Dakar operations.

Vichy’s general refusal to associate the attack with the Free French was not lost on the British press. *The Guardian* pithily pointed out “It would appear that Vichy describes all the actions of General de Gaulle and his forces as British.”<sup>113</sup> Although Vichy was simultaneously dealing with a Japanese ultimatum over Indo China, news concerning Dakar dominated much of the press. On the evening of 23 September, Foreign Minister Paul Baudouin met with representatives of the French and foreign press to inform them of Franco-Japanese negotiations and the British treachery at Dakar.<sup>114</sup> He expressed his frustrations in a telegram bound for British Ambassador in Madrid Sir Samuel Hoare. In it he criticised British actions, blaming them for upsetting the progress in Anglo-Vichy relations made in the last few weeks. A telegram from Vichy to French overseas representatives described the *aggression*, which the British government had brought against French military possessions. Britain and “l’ex-général de Gaulle” were using force to gain what they could not get through honest means.<sup>115</sup> This theme was rife

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<sup>111</sup> Ginio, *French Colonialism*, 16.

<sup>112</sup> William I. Hitchcock, “Pierre Boisson, French West Africa, and the Postwar Eupuration: A Case from the Aix Files,” *French Historical Studies* 24, no.2 (2001): 306.

<sup>113</sup> “Dakar Forts Fire on Free French Warships,” *The Guardian*, 25 September 1940, 5.

<sup>114</sup> Paul Baudouin, *The Private Diaries of Paul Baudouin: March 1940-January 1941*, trans. Sir Charles Petrie (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1948), 247.

<sup>115</sup> Télégramme au départ, de Vichy, 24 September 1940, 10GMII/338, MAE.

throughout the French press. In *Le Temps* every news story that dealt with the event carried a title depicting *L'Agression Anglaise*, *L'Agression Britannique*, or *L'Escadre Britannique*.<sup>116</sup> *L'Echo d'Alger* took the same approach. Not a single story mentioned Free France or the French elements of the operation. Moreover, although these stories were published under slightly different headlines, the body of text was often identical. Vichy, through the *Service de la Propagande* and *Service d'Information Presse et Censure* clearly had a powerful role in what was printed, and in maintaining rhetorical consistency.

Still, Vichy could not simply ignore the fact that it was de Gaulle, a French general, who had delivered the ultimatum to Pierre Boisson. Seeking to ignore competing narratives of Frenchness, Vichy depicted de Gaulle as a solitary traitor, certainly not the leader of a broad-based movement. The ultimatum became part of a British attempt to dismember the French empire.<sup>117</sup> This approach allowed Vichy to acknowledge that de Gaulle was “leading” the operation in name, but only as a British pawn. *L'Echo d'Alger* wrote that de Gaulle had decided to terminate “the English attack against Dakar.”<sup>118</sup> Through further depictions of Menace as an escalation of Mers el-Kébir, Vichy was able to disassociate the operation from de Gaulle and his alternate claim of Frenchness. This tactic in turn reasserted the right of the French nation to self-defence in the face of “a British desire for French property.”<sup>119</sup> Cablegrams, which Vichy made available for public consumption reinforced this argument and were published in both the French and British press. Publication of Pétain’s cable to Boisson as the operation progressed emphasised the emotive and moral aspects of the struggle: “France is following with emotion and confidence your resistance to mercenary treason and British aggression.”<sup>120</sup>

On the other hand, de Gaulle’s aforementioned inclination to take ownership of the operation as a way to demonstrate autonomy and initiative on the part of the Free French movement was very clear. Press releases issued by

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<sup>116</sup> “Une escadre Anglaise ouvre le feu sur Dakar après avoir adressé un ultimatum aux autorités Françaises,” *Le Temps*, 25 September 1940, 1.

“L’agression Anglaise contre Dakar,” *Le Temps*, 27 September 1940, 1.

“Dernieres nouvelles, l’agression Britannique contre Dakar,” *Le Temps*, 27 September 1940, 2.

<sup>117</sup> “L’agression Britannique contre Dakar,” *Le Temps*, 26 September 1940, 1.

<sup>118</sup> “Les Anglais ont abandonné Dakar,” *L'Echo d'Alger*, 26 September 1940, 1.

<sup>119</sup> Our Special Correspondent, “Vichy’s ‘Blow for Blow’,” *The Times*, 24 September 1940, 4.

<sup>120</sup> “More Vichy Reports,” *The Guardian*, 25 September 1940, 2.

his office complemented the British desire to be disassociated as much as possible from the expedition. Churchill's 8 October Commons address was characteristic of this approach. In it, he described the events at Dakar as "primarily French" while simultaneously defending de Gaulle's assertion that the majority of Frenchmen in Dakar were naturally inclined towards the Free French cause but were unable to act freely, being "employed as the tool of German and Italian masters."<sup>121</sup> Publicly supporting de Gaulle's initial instincts avoided having to directly address how British intelligence failed to anticipate such high levels of resistance. Despite Churchill's evident willingness to defend de Gaulle, the relationship between his government and the Free French was hardly without strain. In the weeks to come, discussions within the War Cabinet and statements issued by the MOI would reveal the highly complex nature of the Vichy, Free French and British relationship.

#### Balancing Relationships: Between Allies and Enemies

An MOI statement published on 26 September subtly shifted blame onto faulty Free-French information and the broader threat of German infiltration. "His Majesty's Government were all the more ready to afford General de Gaulle this support (granted firstly after claims of ready support for de Gaulle in Dakar) as information had reached them that German influence was spreading to Dakar."<sup>122</sup> The underlying message implied that while de Gaulle's information regarding his own popularity may have been faulty, British intelligence based on the likelihood of German infiltration was sound. British communiqués suggested that military backing was provided only on the back of Free French initiative. This assertion attempted to further distance British leadership from the decision-making and thus the political aspects of the operation. British Daventry broadcasts in French took a similar line, arguing that Menace was both Gaullist and, shockingly, non-military in nature. De Gaulle, it was argued, knew that the majority of the population was resolved to rally to the Free French cause, and it was only German and Italian infiltration that forced Vichy to stop pro-allied elements from acting.<sup>123</sup> The

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<sup>121</sup> *Hansard* HC Deb vol. 365 col. 300 (8 October 1940)

<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/oct/08/war-situation>.

<sup>122</sup> "Dakar Action Ended," *The Times*, 26 September 1940, 4.

<sup>123</sup> "Daventry en Français, Situation à Dakar," 26 September 1940, 10GMII/338, MAE.

Daventry broadcasts were also proof of continuing efforts to shore up support within metropolitan France for the British war effort.

Prior to the inception of *Menace*, London believed that French public opinion was shifting towards a more pro-British position. Although they believed the failure of the operation might have reversed this trend, the War Cabinet speculated that French self-confidence could still be strengthened, developing into pro-British sentiment.<sup>124</sup> Churchill informed Roosevelt, “in spite of the Dakar fiasco the Vichy Government is endeavouring to enter into relations with us which shows how the tides are flowing in France now that they feel the German weight and see we are able to hold our own.”<sup>125</sup> It is easy to believe that Churchill exaggerated Vichy’s growing confidence in Britain in order to encourage Roosevelt’s support. Nonetheless, the Foreign Office made similar speculations regarding opinion in Vichy as early as 18 September. Intelligence reports concluded that the French population was slowly beginning to believe that only a British victory could save their future.<sup>126</sup> The Foreign Office continued to monitor opinion in mainland France throughout the war, paying close attention to the popularity of the Pétain government, and above all, Pétain himself. The far from universal popularity of the Free French movement within France meant that continuing to cultivate popular support for the British war effort was not always compatible with the Anglo-Gaullist relationship.

Importantly, Vichy rhetoric also recognised the need to balance Anglo-Vichy relations somewhere between ally and enemy; in other words, pushing Vichy’s case for sovereign authority over an empire threatened by British incursion without, in the process, making such hostile intervention more and not less likely. Baudouin’s office at the Foreign Ministry issued a report that waffled between the possibility of gaining German concessions and alienating Britain completely. The edited title, “Conséquences de l’~~agression~~ la victoire de Dakar,” is illuminating. Ultimately, Baudouin chose to emphasise the outcome of the event: victory and therefore legitimacy for the Vichy government, rather than highlighting British actions. Although believing that resistance at Dakar could lead to German concessions, the report emphasised that it was nonetheless crucial

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<sup>124</sup> W.M. (40) 259<sup>th</sup> Conclusions Minute 2, Confidential Annex, 26 September 1940, CAB 65/15/11, TNA.

<sup>125</sup> Churchill to Roosevelt, 4 October 1940, CHAR 2/399, CA.

<sup>126</sup> Weekly Political Intelligence Summaries, 18 September 1940, FO 371/25235, TNA.

not to engage in a cycle of retaliation that would make them allies of Germany and Italy without any of the real advantages normally accrued in such a partnership.<sup>127</sup> In fact, it speculated that the Dakar episode would actually serve to bring Britain and France closer together by encouraging the British government to stop supporting the Gaullist movement.<sup>128</sup>

The mass media encouraged this idea by heaping blame upon de Gaulle for leading the British to believe that the French colonies were ready to defect. Britain, it was argued, had foolishly allowed itself to be caught up in the doomed adventure.<sup>129</sup> Intelligence reports from the French Foreign Ministry emphasised that de Gaulle was not the obvious British choice for a Free French leader, and that his movement did not have complete freedom.<sup>130</sup> Vichy was also gathering intelligence from servicemen who had been repatriated to the metropole. Many of them cast doubt over the popularity of de Gaulle's movement among the British public. These reports, moreover, estimated the strength of the movement at only 5000 members in mid September.<sup>131</sup> Interviews carried out from 16 September concluded that an influential contingent of British opinion was hostile to the Free French.<sup>132</sup> On 24 September a second report concluded that Menace was not an attack against the Vichy government, but rather, an effort to continue the war against Germany and Italy. It also identified the real threat that German forces would use Anglo-Free French operations as a pretext for occupying the Free Zone and French North Africa.<sup>133</sup> This contrast between the strong moral condemnation contained within the Vichy press and the more tempered analysis and on going information gathering behind closed doors, illustrates how rhetoric was employed in an attempt to maintain support for the new status quo while not slamming the door on its former ally.

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<sup>127</sup> "Conséquences de l'agression - la victoire de Dakar," 26 September 1940, 10GMII/338, MAE.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> "Dernieres nouvelles, l'agression Britannique contre Dakar," *Le Temps*, 1.

"La belle défense de Dakar," *L'Echo d'Alger*, 27 September 1940, 1.

<sup>130</sup> "Renseignement Angleterre, officier Français rapatrié d'Angleterre," 17 September 1940, 9GMII/295, MAE.

<sup>131</sup> "Renseignement, Angleterre, Source: Officier français rapatrié d'Angleterre," 17 September-16 October 1940, 3P102, Dossier 3, Service Historique de la Defense, [Henceforward SHD].

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> "Grande-Bretagne, evenements de Dakar, 23-25 Septembre 1940," 24 September 1940, 10GMII 338, MAE.

Relations between metropolitan France and Britain, as between Britain and de Gaulle, remained complicated. Neither Britain nor Vichy wished to isolate the other completely, and in fact, both sides attempted, to varying extents, to diminish de Gaulle's ability to manoeuvre politically. British Foreign Office intelligence shortly after Menace reported "a recognised Anglophil [sic] movement in Metropolitan France as well as in the empire."<sup>134</sup> As a dissident movement, de Gaulle and his Free French remained reliant upon the British, a status quo that was to become a source of growing tension between these professed allies. Indeed, having already been forced to swallow the British actions at Mers el-Kebir, the unplanned withdrawals from Dakar left de Gaulle with even less influence amongst his British backers.

## Conclusion

The rhetorical aftermath of the Anglo-Free French operations at Dakar was a product of both military limitations and political manoeuvring on all sides. In the British metropole, the mass media was highly critical of the lack of preparation leading up to the invasions and the decision not to follow through with the occupation. Calling for parliamentary explanations, these criticisms demonstrate that de Gaulle's Free French movement was simply not conceived of as an independent actor amongst the British public and press. We know that de Gaulle was fully reliant upon the British for financial support and military backing. It is now possible to conclude that de Gaulle's movement also lacked legitimacy on a more fundamental level. In other words, the movement's lack of material assets contributed to their lack of political capital. Indeed, while Churchill was able to largely resist calls for a parliamentary enquiry into the affair, blame was ultimately allocated to the British Admiral North. Somerville wrote to North on 26 September following a BBC bulletin discussing the French ships that had been allowed through the Strait of Gibraltar, "I wonder if they will try and make me a scapegoat for this blob."<sup>135</sup> After North's dismissal, Cunningham made it clear that he interpreted the move as an attempt to sweep the debacle under the rug. "Of

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<sup>134</sup> Weekly Political Intelligence Summaries, 2 October 1940, FO 371/25235, TNA.

<sup>135</sup> North to Somerville, 26 September 1940, NRTH 2/8, CA.

course much as I admire W.C. he is thoroughly dishonest and always has been.<sup>136</sup>

Operation Menace was very much a British-led event wearing a Free French mask, and not a very convincing one at that. The manner in which the ultimate withdrawal from Dakar was represented in British, Free French and Vichy rhetoric betrayed the complex and at times highly uncertain relationships between the three actors. Although the British may have thought that the Free French nature of the event, at least in rhetorical terms, would avert criticism from themselves in case of failure, and perhaps give them increased leverage in limiting de Gaulle's decision-making capability, the actuality was more complicated. Both British press correspondents and Vichy official and mass media responses emphasised the strong British role, although Vichy was careful to avoid mention of the Free French movement more generally, focussing upon the traitorous ex-general de Gaulle.

Perhaps most evident, however, was the conflict between two competing sources of Frenchness and the extent to which Britain was attempting to balance between the two sides. This idea of contested legitimacy for the French nation state was one that Vichy and de Gaulle would fight throughout the war, and would often be set in an imperial context. Britain was placed in a difficult position, forced to be rhetorically supportive of de Gaulle and the Free French movement more generally, while also maintaining at least a sliver of hope that Vichy would limit or renege entirely on its agreement with Germany. More importantly, Britain sought to sustain pro-Allied sentiment amongst the French population. Given the early unpopularity of the Free French movement, this approach was not always compatible with backing de Gaulle. Notably, this position would become even more difficult in the coming years as American pressure forced Britain to allow relief aid to reach unoccupied France. The United States would shortly gain even more influence after becoming a co-belligerent in December 1941.

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<sup>136</sup> Dudley North, Letters/Correspondence, 5 November 1940, NRTN 2/3, CA.



## Chapter 6: Operation Exporter and the Struggle for the Levant “Hitler will be in Moscow before British are in Beyrouth”<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The French mandate states of Syria and Lebanon were one of the most contentious imperial battlefields of the Second World War. Here, adding to the bitter Anglo-French arguments, rhetorical skirmishes pitched the voices and interests of French governors (actual and potential), against their local, often nationalist opponents for the first time. Although the collapse of France may have “created a tortuous imperial predicament for the French and, consequently, for the British,” neither of these imperial protagonists had given much thought until now to the local populations of the territories involved.<sup>2</sup> The role that the Levant States played, both rhetorically, and strategically, as emblematic of continuing French imperial power or, alternatively, as evidence of Vichy’s craven submission to Axis demands, had been a source of speculation from the moment of the French defeat. A British statement issued on 1 July 1940, just before the bombardments at Mers el-Kébir, betrayed the expectation that the Levant would remain strategically important in the conflict. It stressed that enemy infiltration of this region would be unacceptable. However, it was not until spring 1941 that plans began to seriously coalesce around an actual military operation in the area, plans that culminated in the 8 June invasion by Anglo-Free French Forces as part of operation Exporter.

The complexity of this operation made it unique in several different ways. First, long-established nationalist claims to sovereignty and self-rule, particularly within Syria, left the Free French struggling to maintain a sense of legitimacy within the region despite attempts to fashion the Gaullist administration as a liberating force. General George Catroux, who de Gaulle chose as Delegate General to the Levant may have been an expert in Middle East affairs, having served in 1921 as then high commissioner General Henri Gouraud’s representative in Damascus before heading the Mandate’s influential military intelligence *service de renseignements*. However, the British and Imperial ground forces far outnumbered Catroux’s resources. Under the direction of General Henry Maitland-Wilson, British forces were more successful in

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<sup>1</sup> Spears to Spears Mission, 8 July 1941, GB 165-0269 Box 1A, Middle East Centre Archives [Henceforward MECA].

<sup>2</sup> A.B. Gaunson, *The Anglo-French Clash in Lebanon and Syria, 1940-45* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1987), 1.

attracting positive support from the local Syrian population, substantially because they offered an alternative – and a potential escape – from French rule. However, the British desire to consolidate American support coupled with their continuing distrust of the Free French<sup>3</sup> drove a wedge between the new British occupiers and their Gaullist counterparts, the latter of whom were loathe to renounce what they judged to be France's legitimate political and cultural influence within the Levant. Perhaps most importantly, however, the strengthening of nationalist demands for independence in the Levant was watched closely by neighbouring Arab states, many of who had similar ambitions. As William Roger Louis has rightly pointed out, "The issue of independence in the Levant became a test case of whether or not the British would fulfil their wartime promises."<sup>4</sup> This chapter, and the additional two chapters that examine the Middle East, will consider the case of the Levant as inextricably linked with the broader Arab world.

It is worth emphasising from the start that France had a history of violence in the Levant in response to nationalist opposition. James Gelvin has argued that shifts in the organisation of traditional political structures in the Levant made mass politics following the First World War not only possible, but also inevitable.<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that nationalist sentiment was either completely unified or consistent in its demands. Mount Lebanon, the home of the Maronite Christian minorities and the vast majority of French cultural and educational institutions, was historically supportive of continued French control. Syria, however, despite having a large Christian population, did not have significant ties with France. More importantly, its social structure was fragmented into a number of hostile minority populations, including the Alawites in the North and the Druzes in the South.<sup>6</sup> While the former practiced a form of Shiite Islam, the latter were an endogamous community whose religion drew

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<sup>3</sup> Following Dakar operations Roosevelt had requested that Churchill refrain from sharing information concerning military operations with the French. Henri de Wailly, *Syrie 1941, La Guerre Occultée Vichystes contre Gaullistes* (Paris: Perrin, 2006), 415.

<sup>4</sup> Wm. Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945-51: Arab Nationalism, the United States and Postwar Imperialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 124.

<sup>5</sup> James L. Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>6</sup> D.K. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East: 1914-1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 252.

from “an eclectic mix of Islamic, Christian, Greek, and pagan concepts.”<sup>7</sup> Any successful treaty would, moreover, have to protect this blend of religious minorities from dominance by the Sunni Muslim population. Perhaps most importantly, the traditional ruling class in Syria was made up of clans of notables who had traditionally benefited from a system of “honourable co-operation” with the French. D.K. Fieldhouse has suggested that there were different “shades of nationalism” amongst the notables, whose primary aim was to maintain their own positions as a class of wealthy and powerful landowners.<sup>8</sup>

As a mandatory power installed after the Great War, France faced growing discontent from Syrian nationalists, culminating in the 1925 Druze revolt and the repeated French shelling of Damascus, ordered by General Maurice Gamelin. These uprisings also stoked traditional French imperial distrust of the British, a suspicion nurtured by allegations that they had offered rebel factions arms and refuge. Notably, the man who would later become the Vichy High Commissioner in the Levant, General Henri Fernand Dentz, had succeeded Catroux as the chief of military intelligence during this period and from then on harboured deep suspicions of British intentions. Despite widespread local and international condemnation of French atrocities during the unrest, the League of Nations Mandate Commission stood firm, agreeing to uphold French authority in exchange for a rhetorical commitment to League ideals, even if the events confirmed French illegitimacy in the eyes of the local population.<sup>9</sup> In 1936, by which time French expenditures on the mandate were estimated to be 4 billion francs, negotiations for independence were begun under Léon Blum’s socialist-led coalition.<sup>10</sup> Blum’s Popular Front government eventually signed a Treaty of Independence in December of that year, but the French National Assembly refused to ratify it before war broke out in 1939. In 1941 the issue of independence resurfaced to again become a major source of friction. This time, however, the British had publically tied themselves to the eventuality of a self-governing state or states, as a Syrian and Lebanese union

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 160.

<sup>10</sup> Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism*, 252.

had not yet been ruled out.<sup>11</sup> Although the conflict remained subject to the unending Middle Eastern rivalries between France and Britain, the opinions of the local populations in Syria and Lebanon – as well as the violence they had experienced at the hands of two occupation regimes – further distinguished the Syrian crisis from previous sites of conflict in the French empire.

Unlike previous colonial confrontations involving the French fleet in North Africa and the strategic port of Dakar, Exporter was a protracted military engagement lasting from 8 June-14 July 1941. This made it impossible for policy makers to withhold news from press sources until its conclusion. The extent to which the War Cabinet and Chiefs of Staff (COS) were aware of strong calls for effective action against German infiltration in the region affected how Exporter was planned and what reactions were anticipated. Success was imperative in order to avoid a serious blow to British prestige, with potentially much stronger regional repercussions than those suffered following the failed Dakar operation. However, although early official communiqués emphasised inevitable and swift victory, sustained resistance from Vichy forces eventually necessitated modification of this rosy prediction. Ministry of Information (MOI) Home Intelligence Reports identified heightened criticisms and growing anti-French sentiment amongst the broader British public. The Soviet Union's entry into the war in late June alleviated criticism somewhat within metropolitan Britain. However, after General Dentz surrendered to the British in mid-July, the Middle East rapidly became the regional crucible in which Anglo-Gaullist tension was most severe, the issue at hand being the long-term future of the Levant mandates. The controversy surrounding both the Syrian operation itself and its aftermath make it a rich source for developing an understanding of the complexity of the relations between the warring parties involved. This was a region that was home to long-standing British and French cultural, strategic and economic interests. Examining operation Exporter and the negotiations that followed it will lay the groundwork for later analyses of conflicts in the same region in 1943 and again in 1945. The aim is to provide a rich comparative analysis that investigates official rhetoric in order to highlight deeper sources of Franco-British friction, including the real disparities in military power between

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<sup>11</sup> Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate, The Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920-1945* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1987), 583.

them and their profoundly different priorities as the context shifted from wartime engagement to the prospect of post-war withdrawal.

In addition to the desire to maintain its own prestige at home, official British representations of the attack were influenced by the desire to avoid Vichy and German accusations of imperial expansion. Nazi propaganda depicted Hitler's Germany as the only nation that could be relied upon to grant independence to the Levant. British participation, it argued, was motivated solely by the desire to win a broader struggle for imperial supremacy in the Arab world. In an attempt to combat these depictions, British official communiqués, emphasised the Free French role in the invasions. This approach was compatible with de Gaulle's own attempts to present his movement as the sole representation of French interests. However, the political environment within the Levant was extremely complicated. Nationalist groups in both Syria and Lebanon placed Britain under real pressure to ensure that Catroux's promises of self-governance and independence were carried out. At the same time, Free French rhetoric began to assume familiar, Vichyite tones. It stressed historic claims that France traditionally held in the Levant. The British official line supported an interim Free French administration, which would retain office in wartime prior to eventual Syrian and Lebanese independence. However, this tactic came under mounting political pressure not only locally, but also regionally, throughout Palestine, Iraq and Egypt. Arab nationalists in all three countries had displayed troubling, pro-Axis sympathies.<sup>12</sup> In response, the Foreign Office chose to carve a middle line that avoided specific commitments and timelines in regard to any transition from French rule to formal independence, preferring instead to mould Britain into the figure of arbiter extraordinaire. Nevertheless, as Vichy's colonial power waned with the loss of its toehold in the Levant, Britain found itself with a new Middle Eastern imperial rival in the shape of a fiercely independent Free French administration in Beirut.

Occupation of the territory brought to the fore rhetorical battles, which, unique to this setting and previous operations, attempted to mobilise the support of a local population that was already deeply engaged in their own nationalist struggle. Once again, French forces would accuse Britain of using Arab nationalism "as a pretext and means to oust us from Syria."<sup>13</sup> In the final

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<sup>12</sup> Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs, A History* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 303.

<sup>13</sup> Pedersen, *The Guardians*, 166.

analysis, while British political and military leaders were willing to acquiesce to Free French desires for continued *influence* in the Levant, the reality and strength of nationalist movements such as the Syrian People's Party (founded by nationalist leader Dr Abd al-Rahman Shahbander in 1925) limited their ability to manoeuvre following the invasion. Indeed, if Britain was to continue to enjoy the regional benefits granted her through preferential treaties with Iraq and Egypt, she had to maintain her credibility throughout dealings with the Levant. This meant upholding rhetorical promises of independence, promises that the Free French were reluctant to carry out. Gaullist depictions of the Levant made it seem as though the two states had deep and incorruptible ties with France. However, as tensions escalated from 1941, it became clear that de Gaulle's claims could not have been further from the truth.

### Planning Exporter

Ashley Jackson rightly identifies the Mediterranean and Middle East as the "Empire's central front."<sup>14</sup> Italian incursions into Egypt and Greece, the vital importance of the Suez Canal and the possibility of German forces cutting off access to crucial oil supplies in Iraq and Iran all made the protection of this region important for strategic and economic reasons. German domination in the Balkan Peninsula as well as continual Italian threats to British shipping between Suez and India led to fears that Gibraltar and Suez would be seized by the Axis powers. This would eliminate the remaining strategic Allied holdings in the Middle East.<sup>15</sup> For Britain, the Middle East also represented the last bastion against total dependence on American assistance and its hoped for source of post-war influence.<sup>16</sup> In this context, the Levant states, always the vital strategic pivot in the Middle East, became not only a military, but also a rhetorical battleground. Here, more than ever, the complexity of relations between Gaullist and British forces at a military, political, and cultural level were impossible to separate. Each affected the manner in which both military operations and crucial political decisions were planned, carried out, and justified in the years between 1941 and 1945. At a basic strategic level, the War Cabinet agreed that

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<sup>14</sup> Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 97.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (London: Pimlico, 2006), 16.

<sup>16</sup> John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 523-4.

achieving support in the Levant as well as the broader Middle East region was paramount. Ensuring regional tranquillity meant that vital sources of manpower could be allocated more efficiently to engage with German or Italian forces.

However, major differences of opinion quickly developed between British and Gaullist factions over how to deal with deeply rooted nationalist groups in both Levant states. During the interwar years anti-imperial sentiment in the Levant and other Middle Eastern mandated territories like British Palestine, was an almost constant source of instability. Aviel Roshwald has identified contrasting French and British responses to such tension, arguing that while the former were unwilling to relinquish any influence, the British were prepared to place strategic and economic interests ahead of political influence.<sup>17</sup> These alternative approaches to Mandate governance mirrored Anglo-French tensions between the two world wars, when Britain, and particularly the Foreign Office feared that "...too close an identification with France's anti-nationalist and pro-Christian policy could seriously jeopardize Britain's standing in the Muslim world."<sup>18</sup> Other scholars have argued that British rule in the Middle East was designed to be more tolerable than the comparatively transformative and culturally imposing approach taken by their French counterparts.<sup>19</sup> A relevant example of the French attitude can be seen in the professed attachment to Lebanon, one based on historical claims by the Catholic Church to protect the Levant's Maronite Christian and other ethnic minority populations. French Catholic schools and missions also existed in Syria, as a way to spread French "civilisation."<sup>20</sup> These attachments, which were deeply cultural and highly emotive, continued between British and Gaullist forces.

Certainly, British interest in the fate of the Levant was not a new development in June 1941. Immediately following the French collapse in June 1940, the COS emphasised the importance of maintaining sympathy for the British cause in Syria and Lebanon. At this point, they preferred to preserve the status quo rather than become engaged in costly military operations.<sup>21</sup> French news agency *Havas* did speculate in mid September that year that the situation

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<sup>17</sup> Aviel Roshwald, *Estranged Bedfellows: Britain and France in the Middle East during the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Pedersen, *The Guardians*, 155.

<sup>19</sup> Gaunson, *The Anglo French Clash*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism*, 247.

<sup>21</sup> "Syria, Planning and Operations," 22 July 1940, WO 32/11434, The National Archives [Henceforward TNA].

in Syria was on the point of “boiling over,” with a high likelihood that the French population would shortly rally to de Gaulle’s Free French. However, nothing came of these conjectures.<sup>22</sup> By the end of the year, British hopes for continued Syrian resistance had also faded. High Commissioner Gabriel Puaux had maintained a studied ambiguity but his political star was falling, a fact confirmed by a disappointing meeting that December between Syrian exiles and British diplomats.<sup>23</sup> Shortly after, the hard line Vichyite General Fernand Dentz replaced Puaux, snuffing out any residual hopes of a peaceful change at the top of the administrative tree.

By early spring 1941 Syria’s formal neutrality, and the consequent maintenance of the regional status quo were rapidly eroded by German demands for transit rights, refuelling facilities, and other strategic privileges, demands in which Vichy Foreign Minister Admiral François Darlan seemed willing to acquiesce. The War Cabinet, by this time, also suspected that Vichy was actively collaborating with Germany’s occupation administration and its Armistice Commission envoys in North Africa. A series of low-level, but politically significant Anglo-Vichy armed clashes only served to confirm this belief. On 30 March Royal Navy ships intercepted a convoy of four French merchant vessels off the coast of French North Africa. Vichy responded by firing at the British warships from coastal batteries and later engaging in the aerial bombardment of Gibraltar from Tafaraoui.<sup>24</sup> Two months later, naval tensions between Britain and Vichy peaked with the British bombardment of Axis shipping in the Tunisian port of Sfax. Turkey was also showing an interest in establishing a route through Syria in order to receive British supplies. Agreeing to arrange such a route with Syrian authorities was a tempting possibility in London. A formal Anglo-Turkish arrangement might be the prelude to Turkish entry to the war alongside the Allies – a prospect dangled but ultimately

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<sup>22</sup> “Syrie,” 14 September 1940, 9GMII/295, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères [Henceforward MAE].

<sup>23</sup> Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *British Policy in the Second World War* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1962), 110. Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate* (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), 299. Yossi Olmert, “A False Dilemma? Syria and Lebanon’s Independence during the Mandatory Period,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 32 no. 3 (1996), 46.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Thomas, *The French Empire at War: 1940-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 92.



unfulfilled during Anglo-French-Turkish staff talks before war began in 1939.<sup>25</sup> However, the British were not prepared to use force in Syria to achieve this end.<sup>26</sup> Their reluctance to push matters to the point of violent confrontation was only broken after German infiltration in Syria and Iraq as spring 1941 wore on.

The anti-British coup in Iraq between April and May 1941, a takeover led by the nationalist army officer Rashid Ali al-Ghailani, and supported by German forces using Syrian aerodromes, became the primary catalyst, both strategically and rhetorically, for British action. In late April, General Archibald Wavell, Commander in Chief of the Middle East (until his replacement by General Claude Auchinleck on 21 June) received a telegram from Field Marshal Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS). It cited the danger of German involvement in Syria. It was imperative, Dill emphasised, to prepare a force to support French resistance to a possible German invasion.<sup>27</sup> However, the fact remained that Vichy resistance against further German incursions in Syria was unlikely. Darlan met with Hitler at Berchtesgaden in the Bavarian Alps on 11 May. There, he agreed to allow Germany the use of bases in Syria from where they would assist in the Iraqi revolt against British power.<sup>28</sup>

The British military response was swift. Wavell drew up draft plans on 23 May, which highlighted the continued reluctance within the British service ministries to collaborate with de Gaulle and the Free French more generally. "I do not trust discretion of French generally. Though am sure de Gaulle himself entirely discreet." [sic]<sup>29</sup> He also communicated general uncertainty about Free French abilities to successfully plan and carry out operations. In a letter to Churchill he wrote, "Previous experience has made me somewhat sceptical of information on Syria from Free French sources and Free French plans

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<sup>25</sup> For more on Anglo-Turkish negotiations see: Martin Thomas, "Imperial Defence or Diversionary Attack? Anglo-French Strategic Planning in the Near East, 1936-40," in *Anglo-French Defence Relations Between the Wars*, eds. Martin Alexander and William Philpott (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 157-185.

<sup>26</sup> "Syria, Planning and Operations," 22 July 1940, WO 32/11434, TNA.

<sup>27</sup> CIGS to C in C Middle East, 27 April 1941, WO 32/11434, TNA; Although Wavell was replaced 21 June, Auchinleck was not installed in Cairo until after the armistice negotiations.

<sup>28</sup> Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order 1940-1944* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 117.

<sup>29</sup> Wavell to CIGS, 23 May 1941, WO 32/11434, TNA.

sometimes take little account of realities.”<sup>30</sup> The British partnership with the Free French was, undoubtedly, a complex one. Wavell’s concerns centred on those military factors, which he identified as most liable to affect the immediate success of a full-scale invasion of the Levant States. In reality, Exporter spanned a much larger timeframe. Bound to unfold over a period of weeks and months, it raised a number of additional preoccupations, which were distinct from immediate military or security concerns. These latter anxieties were linked to broader intangible factors such as prestige and trust. After achieving a military victory, the COS anticipated how the operations would be received in the Levant, across the Middle East and at home in Britain. In other words, as in previous operations, the success of Exporter was judged on two levels: first, victory in purely military terms; second, victory in the battle to win the hearts and minds of different, sometimes disparate constituencies of opinion. Churchill’s government, in particular, had to convince Syrian and Lebanese nationalist groups and the wider populations of the Middle East that Britain’s role in the operations was, first and foremost, driven by wartime expediency and emphatically not by imperial ambition. France, as represented by de Gaulle, was posited as the legitimate administrator of the Levant – still, in other words, the tutelary mandate holder. In this vein, press releases consistently described the operation as Free French in nature, one supported by British and Imperial forces but not led by them. However, this tactic also placed British leaders in the more complicated position of acting as guarantor to French promises of independence – another commitment of the mandate holder, which, in this case, was already written into a treaty (the agreement signed in December 1936).

Churchill’s ostensible readiness to temporarily underwrite a veneer of Free French power in the Levant disguised the preeminent concern of British foreign policy: the conservation of what residual pro-British sentiment remained throughout the Arab world. Given the importance of upholding British prestige in the Middle East, London could not allow a Gaullist administration to simply replace the Vichy regime. Nationalist groups would consider this a blatant betrayal of both British and Free French promises of independence. Churchill, in a 19 May note wrote regarding the approach to be taken in Syria: “We must

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<sup>30</sup> Cypher, Wavell to Churchill, 22 May 1941, PREM 3/422/6, TNA.

have an Arab policy.”<sup>31</sup> The prime minister, provocatively, went on to suggest that the course to be taken if the Vichy French army in Syria would not come over to the side of the Allies would be to claim that the mandate had lapsed. This, he argued, would result in the Arabs moving over to the British side in an effort to capitalise on their desires for independence. “The French have forfeited all rights in Syria since they quitted the League of Nations and we are entitled to argue that their Mandate has lapsed. Furthermore, none of our promises to de Gaulle cover mandated territories.”<sup>32</sup> These issues of prestige and political alignment had a material impact on the operational decisions taken in the War Cabinet. Churchill’s key intelligence advisor, Major Desmond Morton confided on 30 March, “The Chiefs of Staff have told my committee on more than one occasion that they would consider the rallying of Syria to our side a matter of high importance...”<sup>33</sup> Edward Spears echoed the same sentiment shortly after this message. On 10 April, in a note to Churchill, Spears speculated that, due to skilful German propaganda, local populations might have become substantially pro-German in orientation. He also emphasised that it was crucial to construct an image of Allied strength to shift Syrians into the Allied camp. This would, he argued, have a considerable effect on the opinion of several groups including the senior officers and men of the French fleet and would “tend to bridle Vichy’s pro-German tendencies.”<sup>34</sup>

As the COS debated the merits of the operation it became clear that a significant portion of the British public also supported demands for action. Home Intelligence Reports identified a widespread “critical attitude over our apparent inactivity towards Syria.”<sup>35</sup> Notably, the reservations expressed in the aftermath of the Dakar expedition, rather than waning, had strengthened. Specifically, growing resentment towards metropolitan France following what was seen as Darlan’s growing collaborationist tendencies resulted in a surge of support for the Free French. Free French press analyses celebrated 5 April as the first time that *The Times* had taken a clear position in favour of Free France.<sup>36</sup> Although the British government in early April still encouraged the press to criticise both

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<sup>31</sup> “Syrian Policy,” 19 May 1941, PREM 3/422/2, TNA.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Morton to Churchill, 30 March 1941, CAB 80/57, TNA.

<sup>34</sup> Major General Spears to Churchill, 10 April 1941, PREM 3/422/1, TNA.

<sup>35</sup> Home Intelligence Weekly Reports, 21-28 May 1941, INF 1/292, TNA.

<sup>36</sup> Telegramme, Francelib, 5 April 1941, AG/3(1)/257, Archives Nationales [Henceforward AN].

Vichy and Darlan, they also advised that Pétain should not be directly condemned for fear of provoking a counter-reaction among French and American opinion, which continued to hold him in high esteem.<sup>37</sup> By late May, Home Intelligence indicated a growing unwillingness among Britons to distinguish between the French people and the Vichy government, leading to popular demands to declare France an enemy nation and seize Dakar and Syria.<sup>38</sup> These calls for committed and successful action in response to the Axis threat further reinforced the COS conclusion that once begun, withdrawing from an attempt to capture the two Levant states was not an option.

Nevertheless, such strident calls for action were not always consistent with Wavell's strategic calculations. He voiced further concerns over the likelihood of military success in Syria, calling the operation "a gamble" and "problematical" as late as 4-5 June.<sup>39</sup> It was only at this late date that the Vice Chiefs of Staff, drawing directly on lessons from Dakar, suggested that increased air support would be beneficial for the start of the operation. The failure to achieve the planned objective in Syria would, they argued, "add to the severity of the blow to our position and prestige."<sup>40</sup> This recognition added to the belief that *British* policy makers in the War Cabinet and COS must maintain control over operational planning. The Anglo-Gaullist relationship came second to fostering, if not a pro-Allied, than a pro-*British* sentiment amongst Syrians. The onus that Churchill, his advisors, and the ambitious Spears placed on concepts such as prestige indicated the extent to which media sources and public reactions served as a measure of military success. Unlike the operations at Mers el-Kébir, during which speculation surrounding the fate of the French fleet was suppressed, press reports in the weeks leading up to Exporter emphasised the threat of German infiltration in the region and thus helped foster deeper popular antagonism towards Vichy. Foreign Minister Anthony Eden lent force to these early and strengthening demands for invasion by pointing to German infiltration in the region. In mid-May he made a highly publicised address in the House of Commons, stressing American displeasure over the German use of aerodromes in Syria. He concluded by warning that

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<sup>37</sup> De Gaulle to Haute Commissaire Brazzaville, 5 April 1941, AG/3(1)/257, AN.

<sup>38</sup> Home Intelligence Weekly Reports, 21-28 May 1941, INF 1/292, TNA.

<sup>39</sup> "Aide Memoire by Vice Chiefs of Staff," 6 June 1941, CAB 80/57/58, TNA.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. Cipher Telegram, War Office to C. in C. Middle East, 6 June 1941, WO 106/3073, TNA.

Britain could respond militarily to curb the German threat. This likelihood was duly included in Vichy's own press analyses.<sup>41</sup> Eden also fostered regional Arab support in a 29 May speech at the Mansion House, in which he gave his support to the Arab Union project.<sup>42</sup>

Vichy officials noted the burgeoning press coverage given to the Levant states in the weeks leading up to Exporter with trepidation. The threat of British action was compounded by the worsening instability within the two mandates. Severe food shortages in Syria through 1941 had provoked strikes and demonstrations, contributing to a general sense of unrest in the region.<sup>43</sup> Press reviews arriving in Vichy from the French Embassy in Dublin anticipated British attacks on the Levant states as early as 9 May. These analyses noted that the British press speculated that Germany was planning to use Syria as a base for attacks on Suez and other strategic nodal points in the Middle East. They noted the "sensational" rhetoric of the article, a tactic, it was argued, which could serve to goad the British government into taking preventative measures.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, press bulletins in late May concluded the British were treating the Levant as enemy-occupied territory.<sup>45</sup> This early mobilisation and the publication of justificatory rhetoric on the British side was met by hasty attempts by Vichy to counter these claims and prove that any German interference in the region had long since ended, a claim that would allow them to criticise any subsequent British attacks as unjustified. A telegram from Darlan to the French embassies in Washington and Madrid requested that they make known to their British counterparts that following Vichy requests, Germany had removed all war material from Syria. This appeal, Darlan added, was catalysed by British radio broadcasts that asserted that Syria had fallen under the German thumb.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Telegramme a l'arrivee de Laforcade, Dublin, 23 May 1941, 10GMII/332, MAE. "Le Temps" 18 May 1941, 10GMII/342, MAE.

<sup>42</sup> James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle that Shaped the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 214.

<sup>43</sup> A.H. Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon, A Political Essay* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), 235.

<sup>44</sup> Telegramme à l'arrivee, de Laforcade, Dublin, 9 May 1941, 10GMII/342, MAE. "Synthese des Évènements du 1er au 10 Juin 1941, Document de Travail Interieur," June 1941, 1P12, Dossier 1, Service Historique de la Defense, [Henceforward SHD].

<sup>45</sup> "Bulletin d'Information pour la Période allant du 27 Mai au 5 Juin 1941," 28 May 1941, 1P12, Dossier 1, SHD.

<sup>46</sup> Telegramme au depart, Darlan to Washington and Madrid, 6 June 1941, 10GMII/342, MAE.

In the final days of May, legalistic issues over the Mandate and the timing of Syrian and Lebanese independence came once again to the fore. These questions rapidly coalesced into sharper sources of friction between the British and Free French leadership. On 24 May Catroux publically echoed British proclamations endorsing the early recognition of Levant state independence. De Gaulle resented this policy, not least because he did not believe Churchill's repeated claims that the British had no interest in usurping the French in the Levant.<sup>47</sup> Certainly, there was a general consensus throughout the British government that it was not worth jeopardising vital British military interests in order to placate French sentiments. A 14 May cypher from the War Office stated this position clearly: "You are certainly free to act against German aircraft in Syria and on French aerodromes irrespective of possible effects of such action on relations with Vichy and Free French."<sup>48</sup> Spears, in turn, became suspicious of de Gaulle's reticence, writing in a cypher to Churchill and the Foreign Office that he feared the General would not give proper assurances of independence to Syria and that this would cause tension in the region and embarrassment to Britain. "The Arab question...as de Gaulle should understand because of our paramount interest in the neighbouring countries," he stressed, "is one we cannot afford to dispute."<sup>49</sup> Spears recognised that although there were two strands of opinion in the Levant (French and Arab), one was far more important than the other. "The former, once rallied is of little interest to us."<sup>50</sup> Spears wrote that if the Free French were to declare and the British to guarantee Syrian independence, this move "would do much to allay Arab hostility."<sup>51</sup> Arab support throughout the Middle East could, moreover, ease pressure on the British in their Palestinian mandate.

Indeed, de Gaulle's conception of independence for the Levant had a different timeline and a different endgame from that being called for by most local nationalist groups. His declarations promising independence were principally designed to quell any local resistance, while his primary goal envisaged, first and foremost, the revitalisation of the French nation. A crucial

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas, *French Empire*, 106. De Wailly, *Syrie 1941*, 369.

<sup>48</sup> Cypher from War Office to C. in C. Middle East, 14 May 1941, PREM 3/422/6, TNA.

<sup>49</sup> Cypher, Spears to Churchill, 5 June 1941, PREM 3/422/6, TNA.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Spears to Spears Mission London, May 1941, GB165-0269 Box 1A, MECA.

part of this recovery was France's ability both to maintain control over her formal empire and to conclude highly favourable treaties with her mandated territories.<sup>52</sup> Such agreements would guarantee "the rights and special interests of France."<sup>53</sup> Because local nationalist sentiment in the Levant was implacably opposed to becoming part of France's informal empire, this would put the British under mounting pressure to back up their own lofty promises of independence. In turn, Free French determination to negotiate a French exit on their own terms widened the gap between their own regional priorities and British foreign policy within the Middle East. Tensions mounted in the days following 8 June as British strategic justifications and attempts to mobilise local sentiments clashed with what de Gaulle continued to see as French historical rights in the region. Meanwhile, relinquishing this vital region left Vichy, in turn, with a decidedly reduced claim to imperial sovereignty.

### **Invasions and Independence**

Unlike previous operations, which began and ended in a matter of days, Exporter lasted over a month, and the nature of the subsequent occupation further distinguished it from the brief engagements fought at Mers el-Kébir and Dakar. As General Wilson's two-pronged invasion via Lebanon and Iraq towards Beirut and Damascus began on 8 June, Catroux made a grand declaration promising independence to Syria and Lebanon. Wavell had written to the War Office on 19 May on the topic of independence for Syria and Lebanon. He argued that "General de Gaulle [should] be pressed" to endorse full independence for both states, and that this statement should subsequently be endorsed by the British Government. Wavell believed that these promises were essential for two reasons. First, they would garner support from Arab contingents in Syria and, secondly, they would counter competing German claims that only they would grant the region independence.<sup>54</sup>

The Foreign Office, and Wavell directly, had a hand in tailoring the content of Catroux's declaration, and communicated their guidelines through the British ambassador in Cairo, Sir Miles Lampson. Catroux's draft statement contained two key assertions, the first of which established the Free French as

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<sup>52</sup> Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 593.

<sup>53</sup> Draft Telegram, Lampson to Foreign Office, 6 June 1941, GB165-0269, Box 1A, MECA.

<sup>54</sup> Wavell to War Office, 19 May 1941, GB165-0269, Box 1A, MECA.

the true voice of France. The second promised an end to the mandate and, subsequently, independence, but only after the conclusion of a treaty “conceived in the spirit of [the] Anglo-Egyptian treaty.”<sup>55</sup> However, the Foreign Office objected to some of the content of Catroux’s draft, and responded with some guidelines for revision. Most notably, they excised sentences that alluded to an inherent bond between the Levant and France. In Catroux’s original statement, he had first criticised the Vichy government for failing to live up to the promises it had made, independence above all. However, he followed these claims by saying that he had come “to make France live again for you.” The Foreign Office instructed Lampson to omit this sentence from the statement as it would hardly endear the Arabs to Free French intentions. They also requested that Catroux’s promise that the Levant would become “two sovereign states bound to us by a treaty of alliance” be modified, replacing the phrase “bound to us” with the more positive and less coercive sounding “united with us.” Wavell had similar reservations over the statement. He recommended via the War Office that references to the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty should be avoided due to its general unpopularity throughout the Middle East. Likewise, repeated mentions of France more generally would only inflame Arab opinion, which was already anti-French.<sup>56</sup> Spears wrote to Churchill in early June, summarising the importance of making certain that Arab opinion remained supportive of the Allied cause in general, and Britain’s Middle Eastern presence in particular. He immediately identified this issue as part of a specific Middle East problem, writing, “Our own influence in the Arab world will not be increased by being instrumental in substituting one kind of French rule for another.”<sup>57</sup>

However, as mentioned above, publicity in the Levant had to account for the likely reactions amongst both the French and multiple Arab populations, each of which had different views about the future of the Levant. In late May and early June, both Spears and Wavell alternately argued for a pro-Free French and a pro-Arab language to be employed in communications. Spears, on 29 May wrote that statements issued in the Levant should be not only anti-Vichy but also pro-Free French. He claimed that British declarations in favour of Free France would encourage opposition to German infiltration among the

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<sup>55</sup> Lampson to Foreign Office, 20 May 1941, GB165-0269 Box 1A, MECA.

<sup>56</sup> Wavell to War Office, 21 May 1941, GB165-0269 Box 1A, MECA.

<sup>57</sup> Spears to Churchill, 5 June 1941, GB165-0269 Box 1A, MECA.



current French administrators and their families. Spears was offering recommendations on how to garner support from two distinct elements of the local population. In targeting French colonials and the more pro-French Christian minorities in Lebanon, he employed a number of recognisable approaches. Above all, Spears believed that British statements should be “careful to dissociate French people from their Government” making it clear that they had been betrayed by their leaders, thereby arousing a “sense of honour.”<sup>58</sup> He even suggested quoting past French heroes in order to consolidate opinion against Vichy. Napoleon, unsurprisingly, made his list of historical figures. Spears believed that his adage that “the man who obeys the orders of a captive General is a traitor,” would be particularly effective.<sup>59</sup> The following day Wavell, in line with Spears, recommended that a British propaganda campaign should be mounted with the goal of discrediting Vichy and supporting the Free French.<sup>60</sup> This existence of two sources of public opinion within the Levant, each with an opposing view of the future of French rule, made it difficult to maintain a clear line within public statements.

Catroux issued his revised declaration in tandem with a British message of support. This was only the beginning of the attempts made, both on the part of Britain and Free France, to consolidate their respective influence within the Levant and throughout the Arab world. To this end the War Office stressed the importance of setting up a “propaganda machine” in the region as soon as possible.<sup>61</sup> However, justifications of Exporter were formulated on a broad scale, not just within the Middle East. The outpouring of official rhetoric following the invasion and occupation of the Levant can be broken down into three different categories. These categories represent the different levels of opinion and the particular national audiences to which British wartime and foreign policy sought to appeal. The first included British justifications and analyses directed at the British public and dealt largely with criticisms surrounding the efficacy of the operation. The second was a battle between British and Vichy rhetoric, in which the latter would unsuccessfully rehash worn out arguments based on its own legal and national standing. The third was aimed largely at the local

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<sup>58</sup> Spears to Foreign Office, 28 May 1941, GB165-0269 Box 1A, MECA.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Wavell to War office, 29 May 1941, GB165-0269 Box 1A, MECA.

<sup>61</sup> Cipher Telegram, War Office to C. in C. Middle East, 7 June 1941, WO 106/3073, TNA.

population within Syria and concentrated upon garnering support through rhetoric fixated upon promises of independence. This last platform would become an increasing source of conflict between British and Gaullist forces.

#### Press Responses within Britain: Countering Criticism

Given the already extensive speculation around German infiltration in the Levant, it was not surprising that after 8 June the British press continued to support action to quash this threat. Nevertheless, in official quarters, the *idea* of Anglo-French cooperation, at least for public consumption, was never abandoned. The War Office issued instructions that press reports for publication should “refer to French opposition as Vichy troops or Vichy planes not (repeat not) as enemy.”<sup>62</sup> However, high levels of resistance from Vichy troops in the Levant made it difficult to depict their armed forces as a victim of German domination. These divisions threatened to jeopardise Catroux’s early claims that the Free French would be welcomed as liberators. Having anticipated the eventuality of resistance in Syria, the Foreign Office had already adopted a plan, which justified Allied actions while vindicating the French public. It blamed the mounting collaborationism between Hitler and Darlan for putting the Allies in an impossible position and forcing them to act, however reluctantly.<sup>63</sup>

This justification chimed with previous approaches by describing Allied actions as not only necessary, but inevitable. However, the continuing, and at times noticeably slow-moving, drive into the interior of both countries made it hard to formulate a straightforward explanation for the operation. Vichy’s decision to resist meant the Foreign Office was forced to balance between a hard line rhetoric, which received positive support at home, and a desire not to alienate metropolitan French sentiment with excessive bloodshed. Early press releases, including the following quote, justified what were described as actions taken by Free French forces, with a supporting contingent of British Imperial forces. “His Majesty’s Government could not be expected to tolerate such actions...Free French troops have, therefore, with the support of Imperial

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<sup>62</sup> Cipher Telegram, War Office to C. in C. Middle East, 11 June 1941, WO 193/969, TNA.

<sup>63</sup> Foreign Office, French Department, 7 June 1941, AG/3(1)/202, AN. “Why We Entered Syria: Bases Put at Disposal of the Enemy,” *The Guardian*, 9 June 1941, 6.

forces, entered Syria and the Lebanon.”<sup>64</sup> The conscious decision to portray the event as a Free French operation was reminiscent of the failed invasion at Dakar. However, in the case of Exporter, there was a greater acknowledgement of the role British forces were playing, even if the Free French remained in theory the legitimate beneficiaries. Recall that following Dakar there was a great deal of criticism directed towards the British government for failing to follow through with the operation. During Exporter, Churchill’s government in London had to contend with similar challenges, which were rooted in the public desire for clearly perceptible progress in the war effort.

The withdrawal from Crete in the week prior to Exporter had seen disappointing morale reports and criticism in the press. Home Intelligence concluded, “General feeling about the progress of the war is possibly more pessimistic this week than at any period since the fall of France.”<sup>65</sup> In the War Cabinet, policy makers faced an anxious public who were calling for real wartime victories. Commenting upon the above decline in sentiment, the same report stated, “In its almost unanimous outburst of criticism, the press seems not to have led public opinion but to have followed.”<sup>66</sup> Although early media publications indicated that Vichy troops were not showing much resistance, prolonged fighting called these claims into question.<sup>67</sup> A 16 June war communiqué was one of the first to admit that Vichy troops in Syria were putting up a fierce struggle.<sup>68</sup> Wavell’s report on the invasion force’s approach to Damascus was even bleaker: “Politically and psychologically Free French almost universally unpopular in Syria.”<sup>69</sup>

The MOI swiftly linked negative public responses to what appeared to be a lack of conviction behind Allied advances. Intelligence reports that surveyed opinion on Exporter operations indicated widespread disappointment that “our progress is not overwhelming and rapid, in the grand German manner.” Explanations for this outcome included both fears of offending the French and

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<sup>64</sup> “Allied Forces March into Syria,” *The Times*, June 9 1941, 4.

<sup>65</sup> Home Intelligence Reports, 28 May-4 June 1941, INF 1/292, TNA.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Special Correspondent, “Entry at Dawn,” *The Times*, 10 June 1941, 4.

<sup>68</sup> “War Communiqué,” 16 June 1941, WO 216/10, TNA.

<sup>69</sup> C. in C. Middle East to War Office, 16 July 1941, GB165-0269 Box 1 File 7, MECA.

meeting greater than expected resistance.<sup>70</sup> However, media publications that appeared to show sympathy for the Vichy troops were viewed negatively. A 17 June article in *The Times* wrote, "Fighting is being resorted to only when gentle persuasion fails."<sup>71</sup> Reports like this one, which depicted a less hard-line approach, became a source of frustration in the War Cabinet. Churchill, writing to Wavell only the day before, made it clear that despite the "rumours" present in the press that the slow progress of the operation was due to attempts to "avoid shedding French blood," only military factors should be taken into consideration.<sup>72</sup> Replying to Churchill's query, General Blamey stated that although there was no truth to the rumours, the operation simply could not move any faster as his units lacked the strength to deal effectively with high levels of Vichy resistance.<sup>73</sup>

There was little actual concrete information on troops movements and locations, and yet media stories remained descriptive as well as emotive in nature. The troops, one article asserted, "do not conceive of themselves as invaders, nor is this in intention an operation of war."<sup>74</sup> Clearly, this was a substantial exaggeration. This tactic illustrates the substitution of an aggressive idea (invasion), with a less specific, morally comforting image. Word choice was used strategically to promote victory as a foregone conclusion, particularly after it became clear that the operation would not be resolved quickly. In order to reinforce this contrast between local collusion and dogged Vichyite hostility, the colonial regime was portrayed using language that personified its governing body as an entity distinct from French opinion. Bad deeds perpetrated by "Vichy men", allegations that "Vichy's conscience is not clear" and discussions of Vichy's embarrassment over the struggle all worked to draw a clear line between "the few" that engaged in collaborative crimes and the vast majority of French opinion.<sup>75</sup> Exporter was a liberation by the legitimate representative of France, not an occupation by a hostile power. Churchill firmly grounded this

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<sup>70</sup> Home Intelligence Reports, 18-25 June 1941, INF 1/292, TNA.

<sup>71</sup> Our Correspondent, "Divided Allegiance in Syria," *The Times*, 17 June 1941, 4.

<sup>72</sup> Telegram, Churchill to Wavell, 16 June 1941, WO 216/10, TNA.

<sup>73</sup> Cypher, Blamey to Churchill, 17 June 1941, PREM 3/422/6, TNA.

<sup>74</sup> "The Advance into Syria," *The Times*, 11 June 1941, 5.

<sup>75</sup> Alexander Werth, "Embarrassment of Vichy: French Public Aware of Why We Entered Syria," *The Guardian*, 11 June 1941, 8. Alexander Werth, "Vichy's Three Objectives in Syria: Stirring up Anti-British Feeling," *The Guardian*, 13 June 1941, 8.

sentiment in his 10 June Commons address. “We shall do all in our power to restore the freedom, independence and rights of France.”<sup>76</sup> This claim was at the heart of a broader justificatory rhetoric that sought to determine who the rightful mandate holder was, and therefore, the legitimate source of Frenchness. At the same time, an increasingly hostile Vichy response alleged that Exporter was merely a British attempt to expand its own empire.

### Competing Rhetoric between Britain and Vichy

From a purely practical point of view, during this period Vichy faced the added struggle of maintaining a functioning press. *Le Temps* was unavailable for much of 1941, and other popular dailies including *Le Figaro* only published 8 editions between June and July. A 3 July letter from the *Secrétaire général adjoint de l’information* informed newspaper offices that the press situation had become critical due to serious paper shortages.<sup>77</sup> Shorter newspapers, often consisting of only three or four pages, had to prioritise official press releases and communications made by Vichy officials, meaning that the actual number of independent articles and indeed the availability of news itself was much sparser than in Britain. April 1941 had seen increased censorship on a broad scale, with the removal of books from public libraries that were forbidden by the German authorities on the grounds of either political extremism or alleged moral degeneracy.<sup>78</sup> Official communiqués from Vichy or statements issued by Pétain made up the vast majority of the press coverage in those papers that were able to print as well as colonial editions such as *L’Echo d’Alger*. They were also widely available in the British press.

As we have seen, accusations and criticisms surrounding Vichy’s collaborationist policies in the Levant were rife throughout the British media in the days leading up to the operation. Pétain confronted these allegations in his official radio address following the invasion. Addressing the Levant directly, Pétain accused British propaganda of forging a pretext for aggression.<sup>79</sup> Vichy officials claimed that British accusations were merely an excuse to seize the region for themselves, and further Vichy reports went on to suggest that the

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<sup>76</sup> *Hansard* HC Deb vol. 372 col. 158 (10 June 1941)

<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1941/jun/10/defence-of-crete>.

<sup>77</sup> “Autorisations de Publications 1941,” 3 July 1941, F/41/106, AN.

<sup>78</sup> “Surveillance 1940-44,” 4 April 1941, F/7/14882, AN.

<sup>79</sup> “Le Maréchal Pétain aux Français du Levant,” *Echo D’Alger*, 9 June 1941, 1.

British government had worked up American opinion by citing false information about Syria.<sup>80</sup> Pétain, whose addresses were always highly emotive, called upon Frenchmen in Syria “to fight in a just cause and for the integrity of the territory entrusted to France by history.”<sup>81</sup> The official Vichy communiqué issued in response to 8 June predictably identified British troops as the aggressors.<sup>82</sup> Subsequent press responses followed a familiar line of argument: *British* aggression threatened the territory of a sovereign and neutral state. They described a history of hostility, citing earlier operations at Mers el-Kébir, Dakar and Sfax.

Subsequent Vichy communiqués also made it clear that while Gaullist troops were being used as part of the operation, the moving force and therefore the fault lay with the British. Pétain’s initial radio declaration, subsequently published in the press, directly attacked de Gaulle’s 1940 rhetoric, in which he had sworn never to engage in a fight against Frenchmen. This was an obvious attempt to delegitimise the movement. “The attack is led, as at Dakar, by Frenchmen serving under a dissident flag. Supported by British Imperial forces, they are not hesitating to spill the blood of their brothers defending the unity of the Empire and French Sovereignty.”<sup>83</sup> The Vichy regime thus attempted to frame the incursions in the Levant as a direct violation of the rights of a neutral nation. Such depictions deliberately challenged British justifications, which argued that the use of armed force for the “greater good” of one’s own community and “the international order” was acceptable and desirable.<sup>84</sup>

Official Vichy statements also attempted to address the awkward issue of Franco-German collaboration. They argued that German planes were only transiting through Syria. The British press countered this explanation, reasoning that surely Germany was not to be trusted. Vichy, merely by admitting that German troops had at one point been in Syria, had effectively justified Exporter. As the *Times* diplomatic correspondent suggested,

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<sup>80</sup> Telegramme a l’arrivée, de M. Lyautey, 18 June 1941, 10GMII/342, TNA.

<sup>81</sup> Our Correspondent, “Weygand and Vichy,” *The Times*, 9 June 1941, 3.

<sup>82</sup> “Communiqué officiel du 8 Juin,” *L’Echo d’Alger*, 9 June 1941, 1.

<sup>83</sup> “Le Maréchal Pétain aux Français du Levant,” *L’Echo d’Alger*, 9 June 1941, 1. “What Vichy Says,” *The Guardian*, 9 June 1941, 6. “L’Attaque contre La Syrie et la Defense de Notre Empire,” *Le Figaro*, 9 June 1941, 2.

<sup>84</sup> James Turner Johnson, *Ethics and the Use of Force: Just War in Historical Perspective* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2011), 2.

“Germany’s pretence at withdrawal was only a typical German trick to try to prove the British the aggressors.”<sup>85</sup> There likewise appeared to be little sympathy amongst the British public for Vichy’s explanations. Home Intelligence Reports concluded “The resistance of the Vichy forces intensifies dislike and contempt for the French, and there seems to be little attempt to distinguish between Vichy and Frenchmen generally.” The same report suggested implementing an intense propaganda campaign to combat anti-French feeling following reports of attacks on Free French sailors, allegedly mistaken as Vichy troops.<sup>86</sup>

The German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 did result in some improvement in popular British morale. Churchill’s Commons address in reaction to news of *Barbarossa* was reportedly met with great approval and “quelled a rising tide of criticism and doubt of the higher direction of the war.”<sup>87</sup> This significant development also became the main focus of news for the Vichy French press. Nevertheless, despite this shift in focus amongst the two metropolitan medias, a new source of tension began to develop within the Levant States themselves, this time between the British and the Free French. The former’s broad strategic concerns began to depart from the latter’s resolute desire to protect the traditional French role in the Levant.

#### Between Two Allies: Power, Prestige and Independence

On 8 July Spears wrote to Robert Parr, the British Consul General at Brazzaville, noting “...that the country [Syria], insofar as it has an opinion at all, would gladly sever its connexion with France.”<sup>88</sup> The increasingly undeniable strength of local opinion in the Levant had a tangible impact both on British and Free French policy considerations, and on the way in which the future of the two mandates was discussed. At the crux of this issue was the idea of independence, an outcome promised to Syria and Lebanon by both the British and Free French. The two European contingents tried to mobilise rhetoric that appealed to nationalist sentiments and bolstered their respective prestige.

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<sup>85</sup> Diplomatic Correspondent, “Vichy Protest to Britain,” *The Times*, 11 June 1941, 3.

<sup>86</sup> Home Intelligence Weekly Reports, 25 June-2 July 1941, INF 1/292, TNA.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Spears to Spears Mission Brazzaville, 8 July 1941, GB165-0269 Box 1A, MECA.

However, it quickly became apparent that each had entirely different motivations for pursuing this approach. The Foreign Office knew that the fate of the Levant states was important because the broader Middle East was watching closely to see if Britain would put pressure on France to follow through on independence. De Gaulle, on the other hand, preferred to resist nationalist demands as long as possible in order to ensure that his Levant representatives would retain the manoeuvrability to conclude favourable Franco-Syrian and Franco-Lebanese treaties. As underlying British and Free French political and military tactics clashed, local voices became a useful barometer to gauge respective successes and internal prestige.

The operations in Syria were further complicated by the obvious superiority of British military power over that of the Free French. British and imperial troops made up the bulk of the invasion and occupation forces. Spears had argued that troops from as many nationalities as possible should take part in the operations as this would have a great “psychological effect” on Vichy troops.<sup>89</sup> Official statistics reported that the operation included 9000 British, 18,000 Australian, 2000 Indian and 5000 Free French troops.<sup>90</sup> However, even though the British promoted the Free French as the political custodians of the Levant states, the reality was that there was little they could do without British backup. This reality was a great source of frustration for de Gaulle. Eden reaffirmed the British policy of Syrian independence following the cessation of hostilities on 14 July, writing to Cairo-based British Minister of State Oliver Lyttleton in these terms: “It was never our intention that Free French should virtually step into the place of the Dentz Administration or that they should govern Syria in the name of France.”<sup>91</sup> Prior to departing his post, Wavell expressed similar concerns that if the local population came to believe that the Free French planned to renege on their promises, this would have a negative effect upon British prestige locally and throughout the Arab world.<sup>92</sup> To this end, the British sought to bolster their own legitimacy in the Middle East through renewed proclamations of independence.

At the same time, there were other risks involved. Appearing publically to subjugate Free French interests in favour of British ones risked losing support

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<sup>89</sup> Spears to Foreign Office, 1 June 1941, GB165-0269 Box 1A, MECA.

<sup>90</sup> Cypher, C. in C. Middle East to War Office, 4 July 1941, WO 216/10, TNA.

<sup>91</sup> Cypher, Foreign Secretary to Lyttleton, 3 July 1941, PREM 3/422/6, TNA.

<sup>92</sup> Cypher, C. in C. Middle East to War Office, 2 July 1941, PREM 3/422/6, TNA.



within metropolitan France. This meant that internal disagreements had to be carefully hidden. De Gaulle was also in favour of masking the level of British power behind the invasion and occupation. This approach would advance his legitimacy, at least on a rhetorical level. He also predicted that if the Anglo-Gaullist alliance fell apart, this would allow the Axis and Vichy to turn French opinion against them.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, in what can be construed as a veiled threat he warned Churchill that international opinion would be “watching closely the attitude which Great Britain will take towards the position of France in this region.”<sup>94</sup> Undoubtedly, de Gaulle still considered the Levant as a French mandate, one whose future was very much in French hands. He was fundamentally unwilling to relinquish French political primacy in what he believed were now Free French imperial territories. While his plan in case of local opposition called for assuring independence to the two states, it also emphasised the continuation of established French institutions.<sup>95</sup>

The British were not fundamentally opposed to this arrangement, but they also had strategic and equally troubling regional interests of their own in Palestine, Egypt and Iraq to consider. Churchill, responding to rumours that Britain desired to usurp the French role in the Levant, wrote to former League of Nations delegate René Cassin “This country has no intention of upsetting French rights in Syria. On the contrary, we desire to assure those rights against every other power.”<sup>96</sup> Ultimately, however, Churchill’s assurances, both privately and in the Commons were never carried further than vague promises. Nowhere in the British government was the preservation of French influence a priority over Britain’s own regional interests. Even Spears, the original champion of the Free French movement, was clear on this matter. Writing to Consul-General Robert Parr at the Spears Mission in Brazzaville in late July he stated decisively, “No French officer however high in rank must ever be allowed to run down British authorities and if any should forget, as some apparently do, that we are the predominant partner in the Alliance, they must be gently reminded of

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<sup>93</sup> De Gaulle to Churchill, June 1941, AG/3(1)/202, AN.

<sup>94</sup> Cypher, de Gaulle to Churchill, 29 June 1941, PREM 3/422/6, TNA. De Gaulle to Churchill, 29 June 1941, 18GMII/39, MAE.

<sup>95</sup> De Gaulle to Plevin, 5 June 1941, AG/3(1)/202, AN.

<sup>96</sup> Churchill to Cassin, July 1941, 18GMII/39, MAE.

this fact. No French soldier would have a rifle in his hand or a franc in his pocket were it not for us.”<sup>97</sup>

British concerns surrounding the stability of the Arab region were evident throughout the operation. Most importantly for this analysis, they impacted on Wavell’s attempts to explain the invasions to local audiences in the Middle East. He soon abandoned his initial attempts to legitimise the operation by arguing that troops were meeting little or no resistance from Vichy. He decided these depictions were no longer credible and were in fact creating suspicions of British duplicity among those observing the course of the invasion in Palestine and Egypt.<sup>98</sup> He informed the War Office “We are now taking line that opposition was in fact thin and sporadic at first but that in the nature of things fighting once started does spread and consequently opposition is now more general and fighting has been severe in places.”<sup>99</sup> Unlike previous operations, the absolute necessity of managing Arab opinion in response to the invasions was considered within the operational plans constructed by the War and Foreign Offices. Wavell was responsible for issuing “proclamations” to local press agencies in Cairo and Jerusalem immediately following the inception of Exporter while the Foreign Office managed the invasion-related propaganda in India and Turkey.<sup>100</sup>

Although Wavell’s early reports stressed that the Arabs seemed generally pleased at the British arrival, tensions between the British and Gaullist leadership soon became apparent.<sup>101</sup> A telegram from the War Office informed Wavell that after Dentz’s 10 July request to negotiate terms for an armistice, de Gaulle appeared to have ceded General Catroux the full powers previously enjoyed by Dentz. This, he hoped, would exclude the British from any real control.<sup>102</sup> De Gaulle was apparently also increasingly anxious about the

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<sup>97</sup> Spears to Spears Mission, Brazzaville, 23 July 1941, GB165-0269, Box 1A MECA.

<sup>98</sup> Secret Cipher Telegram, C in C Middle East to War Office, 19 June 1941, WO 193/969, TNA.

<sup>99</sup> Secret Cipher Telegram, C. in C. Middle East to War Office, June 1941, WO 193/959, TNA.

<sup>100</sup> Secret Cipher Telegram, C. in C. Middle East to War Office, 7 June 1941, WO 106/3073, TNA.

<sup>101</sup> Secret Cipher Telegram, C. in C. Middle East to War Office, 10 June 1941, WO 106/3073, TNA.

<sup>102</sup> Secret Cipher Telegram, War Office to C. in C. Middle East, 1 July 1941, WO 106/3073, TNA.

emerging power structure in the Levant. He believed that the departure of Wavell from Cairo to his new position as Viceroy of India had “left the field clear for the passions of the “arabophiles”.”<sup>103</sup> Dentz’s subsequent refusal to negotiate with the Free French further annoyed de Gaulle, especially when Churchill informed Lyttleton that it was crucial that terms were signed even if it meant agreeing to such a stipulation.<sup>104</sup> On the evening of 12 July General Wilson and Dentz’s representative, General Joseph de Verdilhac, signed armistice terms. These were ratified on 14 July, after which the War Cabinet quickly created the Committee on Foreign (Allied) Resistance in Syria. Led by Major Morton, this new committee became the central informational and policy-making hub. The committee began meeting on 18 July and was kept informed of both military and political issues in the Levant by the War, Foreign and Colonial Offices.<sup>105</sup> However, in the weeks to follow it became clear that Anglo-Gaullist interests in the region were not always compatible. This resulted in competing discourses that fought to gain support within the Middle East and Levant States alike.

### **Post Armistice: Imperial Tension and Rhetorical Battlegrounds**

Philip Khoury has argued that “The catalyst for independence was the establishment of a large British presence in the heart of Syria.”<sup>106</sup> Certainly, independence movements had existed prior to the outbreak of war, although there was never one distinct idea of Arab nationalism.<sup>107</sup> It was, arguably, much more than simply the presence of a British or Imperial force within Syria that spurred on these movements. The Foreign Office was instrumental in encouraging local representatives like Lampson and Lyttleton to garner Arab support regardless of the consequences for Free French prestige. De Gaulle wrote bitterly of the armistice agreement that it did not contain “a word about the rights of France, either for the present or for the future,” and accused the British of imperial greed.<sup>108</sup> On 16 July de Gaulle left Brazzaville for Cairo,

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<sup>103</sup> Charles de Gaulle, *War Memoirs Volume One, The Call to Honour 1940-1942*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (London: Collins, 1955), 194.

<sup>104</sup> Note, Churchill to Lyttleton, 12 July 1941, WO 216/10, TNA.

<sup>105</sup> War Cabinet, Committee on Foreign (Allied) Resistance (Syria), 18 July 1941, GB165-0269, Box 1 File 4, MECA.

<sup>106</sup> Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 583.

<sup>107</sup> Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties*, 7.

<sup>108</sup> De Gaulle, *Call to Honour*, 194

reportedly in a very “anti British mood.”<sup>109</sup> His early disappointment regarding the armistice would soon be magnified when he discovered the existence of a secret protocol, which forbade personal contact between Vichy French and Allied forces. In the months to come he continued to object strongly to Britain’s Arab-centred policy. What was most galling was that Arab opinion, and not Free French demands, held sway throughout the Foreign Office and within Middle East Command (MEC).

A Foreign Office memo to Churchill expressed concern that Arab opinion would react badly if too much power was granted to the Free French in Syria, especially if the British were seen to be playing little or no role.<sup>110</sup> More explicit instructions sent to Lampson from the Foreign Office emphasised, “support of Arab world is of greater importance to us and we must not risk losing this in our material desire to meet Free French wishes.”<sup>111</sup> Lampson and Auchinleck (now Commander in Chief Middle East) were instructed to prioritise responses to Arab concerns over any moves that could be viewed as prejudicial to independence.<sup>112</sup> However, while the Foreign Office and MEC were primarily concerned with Arab reactions, Churchill and the MOI stressed the need to maintain positive imagery within Britain of Anglo-French relations more generally. This latter concern highlighted the difficulty of addressing opinion locally in the Levant and in the metropolitan centres of France and Britain.

The end of the Syrian campaign was met with “relief everywhere” on the British home front.<sup>113</sup> British press responses to Dentz’s request for an armistice encouraged speculation over the future of the French position in the Levant. Most articles pointed out that the German threat had *required* engagement in a campaign that was “forced upon the British and the Free French against their will and against their hearts.”<sup>114</sup> Both *The Times* and *The Guardian* emphasised the regrettable necessity of the invasion and argued that, far from wanting to fight the British, sustained struggle was in fact the

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<sup>109</sup> Spears Mission, Brazzaville to War Office, 16 July 1941, GB165-0269 Box 1A, MECA.

<sup>110</sup> Note, Foreign Office to Churchill, 14 July 1941, WO 216/10, TNA.

<sup>111</sup> Telegram, Foreign Office to Lampson, 14 July 1941, WO 216/10, TNA.  
Telegram, Foreign Office to Lampson, 14 July 1941, PREM 3/422/7, TNA.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Weekly Intelligence Reports, 9-16 July, INF 1/292, TNA.

<sup>114</sup> Diplomatic Correspondent, “No Vindictive Terms Likely,” *The Times*, 10 July 1941, 4.

result of German conniving.<sup>115</sup> An article entitled “French Dupes in Syria” stipulated that prisoner statements showed that Vichy troops did not want to fight the British, but had been deceived by the Germans, who convinced them that they had never used and never would use Syria as a base for operations against their former ally. Thus, they mistakenly believed they were simply defending their territorial integrity following an unprovoked Anglo-Free French invasion.<sup>116</sup> Another article portrayed General de Verdilhac as no less than an honourable Frenchman, who, upon arriving at the negotiations, “winked broadly, drew his hand quickly across his throat, and whispered in a voice full of meaning, “Les Boches.””<sup>117</sup> These assertions, and others that celebrated the rapid transition of Vichy troops to the Free French side were greatly exaggerated, even if they attempted to give de Gaulle an elevated role in the conflict. In fact, these approaches were symptomatic of the repeated attempt to discredit a very specific circle of “Vichy men,” paving the way for the exoneration of the majority of “common” Frenchmen.

Still, de Gaulle remained unhappy with the content of the armistice, particularly the additional protocol. This led to an exchange of letters between Lyttleton and de Gaulle, culminating in the Lyttleton-de Gaulle agreement. This understanding simply put in writing Lyttleton’s assurance that Britain had no desire to usurp the Levant from the French. He confirmed “...on the British side we recognise the historic interests of the French in the Levant. Great Britain has no interest in Syria or the Lebanon except to win the war.”<sup>118</sup> Churchill attributed de Gaulle’s frustration to the latter’s failure, not only to rally Vichy troops to his cause, but also to gain recognition for the Free French movement as the “true France.” Even at this stage, the Armistice Convention listed de Verdilhac as the representative of the *French* government, and not the *Vichy* government.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Special Correspondent, “The Fighting in Syria: Vichy Prisoners Confused about the Issues,” *The Guardian*, 12 July 1941, 4.

<sup>116</sup> Special Correspondent, “French Dupes in Syria,” *The Times*, 11 July 1941, 3.

<sup>117</sup> Special Correspondent, “Armistice in Syria,” *The Times*, 14 July 1941, 4.

<sup>118</sup> “Extracts from Lyttleton-de Gaulle Agreement,” 25 July 1941, PREM 3/423/4, TNA. “Projet d’accord Franco Britannique au Levant,” 25 July 1941, 18GMII/43, MAE.

<sup>119</sup> Cypher Telegram, Churchill to Lyttleton, July 1941, PREM 3/422/6, TNA.

The Free French movement was certainly not awarded the primary political role envisaged by de Gaulle. For example, prior to his departure, Wavell issued instructions to the British mass media to avoid using the word 'armistice' in all reports. They should instead describe the agreement as a 'convention'. When the War Office asked Wavell for clarification on this issue of word choice, he responded that the press should be told that a convention was a lasting agreement, rather than a temporary expedient.<sup>120</sup> Of course, calling the agreement a convention also avoided connotations of animosity that were inherent in the term 'armistice'. In any case, these strategic efforts to recast Exporter outside of a military framework using neutral vocabulary were thwarted when the British media received a telegram from New York announcing that an armistice had been signed one hour prior to British instructions. Thus, "the whole of the British press had made use of the word "armistice" and not "convention" etc."<sup>121</sup> Arguably, these tactics were not employed solely or even primarily to placate the British public. The MOI had already concluded that the majority of British people were not only sympathetic towards the operation, but in favour of a harsher stance towards metropolitan France as a whole. Rather, the British government's media manipulation underlined the continued belief within the War Cabinet that the idea of Anglo-French alliance should not be abandoned. This belief looked towards the end of the war and eventual Allied victory as a time when this relationship would have to be reforged.

These simultaneous attempts to protect both the Anglo-French and the Anglo-Arab relationship only became more challenging to maintain as time went on. As will become more apparent in the final two chapters on the unfolding Levant situation, this was because the British were forced to take decisive action in response to unilateral and violent Free French policy initiatives in 1943 and 1945. In 1941, by contrast, it was still possible to engage in a wait and see approach. Lyttleton's negotiations with de Gaulle were a good example of this frame of mind. They underlined the hope that current tensions between Free French and (particularly Syrian) nationalist groups could be solved without damaging British regional prestige. In the Commons Churchill

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<sup>120</sup> War Office to C. in C. Middle East, 15 July 1941, GB165-0269 Box 1A, MECA. C. in C. Middle East to War Office, 15 July 1941, GB165-0269 Box 1A, MECA.

<sup>121</sup> Draft Message, from Lt. Col D.D.I.P, 17 July 1941, WO 106/5707, TNA.

had addressed this same sentiment publically. After announcing the conclusion of a military *convention* in Syria, he emphasised that Britain had no territorial ambitions; rather, “our only objective in occupying the country has been to beat the Germans and help to win the war.”<sup>122</sup> However, this position gradually became untenable as it became obvious that regional stability and Syrian and Lebanese independence were closely intertwined. This conflict between Anglo-Free French Middle Eastern policies was difficult to maintain on a rhetorical level, because portraying the on-going occupation as an Allied operation connoted a single strategy. A Free French memo noted that although difficulties might be encountered between themselves and the British regarding the administration of Syria, it was essential to present the image of an *entente parfaite* to the Syrian population.<sup>123</sup>

By late July the British press had stopped reporting extensively on the Levant, instead focusing upon the newly opened Russian front. However, regional issues in the Levant continued to complicate Anglo-Free French relations. De Gaulle’s advisors informed him that the attitude of the British in Syria was dictated by Britain’s imperial engagements with the Arabs and the desire to cultivate better relations with the Turks.<sup>124</sup> His response was to embark on an extensive press campaign, the goal of which was to re-establish French legitimacy in the region, as well as on a global level. Working alongside the Free French Press Services, de Gaulle recognised that the French position here would need international backing and acquiescence in order to wield a free hand. Since late July he had instructed Catroux to compile “precise facts” regarding German activities in Syria in order to clarify world opinion.<sup>125</sup> Although Catroux declared Syrian independence on 25 September and Lebanese independence on 27 November, the administrative reins of power nevertheless remained in French hands.<sup>126</sup> Responding to pressure from the Foreign Office, Catroux had reinstated the 1936 constitution, but the coinciding Cabinet was

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<sup>122</sup> *Hansard* HC Deb vol. 373 col. 464 (15 July 1941)

<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1941/jul/15/war-situation>.

<sup>123</sup> “Memoire concernant l’administration des etats de Syrie et du Liban,” July 1941, AG/3(1)/202, AN.

<sup>124</sup> Telegramme Chiffre, au de Gaulle, Beyrouth, 2 August 1941, AG/3(1)/204, AN.

<sup>125</sup> Telegramme, de Gaulle au Catroux, 20 July 1941, AG/3(1)/202, AN.

<sup>126</sup> Ahmed M. Gomaa, *The Foundation of the League of Arab States: Wartime Diplomacy and Inter-Arab Politics 1941-1945* (London: Longman, 1977), 87.

appointed, not elected.<sup>127</sup> At its head as president was Shaykh Taj al-Din al-Hasani, who D.K. Fieldhouse has described as “the central all-purpose French ally in Syria.”<sup>128</sup>

This consolidation of power by the Free French and their noted reluctance to relinquish the mandate brought the issue of empire and imperial rivalry to the fore. Still smarting from what he believed were British intrigues in the Levant, on 1 September de Gaulle conducted an interview with George Weller from the *Chicago Daily News*. He claimed that Vichy was serving as an intermediary between Britain and Germany, and that, like Germany, Britain’s role was also to exploit Vichy.<sup>129</sup> After being confronted by Churchill, de Gaulle, although apologising, maintained his belief (arguably rightly so) that the Free French role in Syria was under threat.<sup>130</sup> Official communiqués issued by Carleton Gardens employed themes of sovereignty, much like Vichy had done a few months earlier, in order to build up legitimacy for the Free French in the Levant. Rhetoric like this directly contradicted local calls for independence.

Paul Henri Siriex, Chief of Free French Press Services, wrote numerous press releases, which emphasised again and again the extent to which the Levant states were not merely under French rule. They were willing participants in a broader resurrection of French greatness, an objective they shared and understood. One report hailed as indistinguishable the patriotic sentiments of both the French and Lebanese populations in Beirut. “For the first time since the Armistice, the inhabitants of Beirut can show freely their patriotism and attachment to France; the spontaneous celebration contrasted with the oppressive and sad regime instituted by Vichy.”<sup>131</sup> This celebration of local affinity for the French was hardly a new tactic. Eugene Rogan described a similar episode during the centenary festivals in Algiers in 1930. Here too, the French used rhetoric to commemorate local fealty and “undying attachment to the motherland.”<sup>132</sup> As de Gaulle travelled throughout Syria that autumn, the Free French Information Service issued a steady stream of press reports that emphasised the French spirit of the Levant and the attachment of the general

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<sup>127</sup> Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism*, 299.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>129</sup> De Wailly, *Syrie 1941*, 415.

<sup>130</sup> “Record of a meeting between the Prime Minister and General de Gaulle,” 12 September 1941, PREM 3/422/3, TNA.

<sup>131</sup> “Paul Henri Siriex, Haifa,” 26 July 1941, AG/3(1)/202, AN.

<sup>132</sup> Rogan, *The Arabs*, 294.



population to the Free French cause.<sup>133</sup> However, in the following years these depictions began to falter.

## Conclusion

In October, Churchill appointed Spears as Minister of State, Beirut. The role that he eventually played in brutally pushing for independence would be the source of untold friction.<sup>134</sup> Even before his appointment, Lyttleton had requested to Catroux that Spears be present at treaty negotiations between France and Syria/France and Lebanon. De Gaulle was fundamentally opposed to this idea. He argued that if this request was in line with the general sentiment of the British government then it was evidently a political line that was “irreconcilable with the sovereign rights of France.”<sup>135</sup> After Exporter the ultimate fate of the Levant states quickly became a vital issue in British foreign policy, and remained so into the post-war period. The War Cabinet confirmed its attitude at a meeting on 5 September: “No action should be taken which would indicate that Syria was necessarily to remain under Free French control.”<sup>136</sup> After successfully ousting General Dentz and the Vichy administration from Syria, the British government as a whole was forced to confront a situation in which competing French, Syrian, Lebanese and Arab ideas of nationalism were of primary importance. By publically supporting a policy of independence, Britain hoped to strengthen its own reputation throughout the Middle East, and particularly in Palestine. The following chapters will build upon these early efforts, identifying how changes in the broader wartime context, including the entry of the United States into the fray and the growing likelihood of Allied victory configured the contours of British Middle Eastern strategy as refracted through Syria. In particular, this approach will consider how publically espoused policy actually limited possible responses to the French arrest of the Lebanese Parliament in 1943 and bombardment of Damascus in 1945.

Amongst the British public the Exporter operations were initially criticised for progressing too slowly, an outcome that was attributed to misplaced

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<sup>133</sup> France Libre, Service de l'Information, 12 August 1941, 18GMII/49, MAE.

<sup>134</sup> Thomas, *French Empire*, 108.

<sup>135</sup> Telegramme, de Gaulle au Cassin, 1 August 1941, AG/3(1)/202, AN.

<sup>136</sup> War Cabinet, Committee on Foreign (Allied) Resistance (Syria), GB165-0269 Box 1 File 4, MECA.

sympathy for Vichy troops. On the other hand, the entirety of the operation had been planned from the premise that it would be more successful if it was represented as a Free French initiative. While British policy makers in both the Cabinet and Foreign Office hoped that this approach would lend the operation increased legitimacy and forestall Vichy and Axis propaganda based on claims of British expansionism, stiff opposition from Vichy troops and the general unpopularity of the Free French amongst the local population resulted in further complications. This was especially evident in the extent to which British rhetoric tried to shore up both the Anglo-Free French and the Anglo-Arab relationships. Specifically, the British could hardly support both Gaullist policy, which persisted in maintaining France's "rightful" place in the Levant, while at the same time polishing their image amongst Arab nationalists, unless, that is, the latter were willing to conclude a treaty in line with French demands. Certainly, from a strategic point of view, the on-going conflict and the pressing need to reallocate scarce men and resources meant that unrest in either the Levant or the broader Middle East was highly undesirable. When push came to shove, the British would choose regional security and longer-term prestige over placating Free French desires for continued influence. While the British were careful to construct a rhetoric based around promises of independence, thereby assuring themselves of local support, the following weeks and months would see these claims tested by de Gaulle's reluctance to give up the territory. Indeed, Exporter laid crucial groundwork for a shift from an Anglo-Vichy to an Anglo-Gaullist conflict based on all too familiar claims of sovereignty and imperial rights.

## Chapter 7: Moral Failure and Operation Torch “A Monumental Piece of Effrontery”<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In the early morning hours of 8 November 1942, Anglo-American forces moved into action with the goal of consolidating Allied power in French North Africa. Operation Torch represented a turning point in the nature of the Allied struggle, as, for the first time, American forces took precedence in a military operation. Churchill later recorded in his memoirs that when General Alphonse Juin, the Commander in Chief of forces in Algeria and alleged Allied sympathiser, informed former Minister of Foreign Affairs Admiral François Darlan of the start of operations, Darlan responded, “I have known for a long time that the British were stupid, but I always believed that the Americans were more intelligent!”<sup>2</sup> Darlan’s reaction, and his identification of the Americans as the primary actors in the drama, fulfilled an important part of the Allied plan. Namely, it sought to portray Torch as a purely strategic endeavour. It was important that there was no room to misrepresent the invasion through the lens of imperial rivalry. By stressing American leadership, American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS) hoped to contain any resistance from Vichy forces that harboured numerous grudges against the British in the years following the French defeat.

While local French opposition was indeed quickly subdued, wider Allied operations in North Africa were more protracted as U.S. troops pushed eastwards in an effort to take Tunisia<sup>3</sup> in the months following the initial Algerian landings. Previous studies have made a thorough analysis of the broader political, military and logistical aspects of these operations.<sup>4</sup> Deserving of more attention here, however, is the growing American role and, more specifically, Roosevelt’s central part in the maintenance of Darlan as head of government in

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<sup>1</sup> Diplomatic Correspondent, “Darlan’s Move: Digging Himself in,” *The Guardian*, 3 December 1942, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 4, *The Hinge of Fate* (London: Cassell, 1951), 548, 550.

<sup>3</sup> Governor General of Tunisia, Jean-Pierre Estava was strongly in favour of the Pétain government.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Layton Funk, *The Politics of Torch: The Allied Landings and the Algiers Putsch 1942* (Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 1974). Keith Sainsbury, *The North African Landings 1942: A Strategic Decision* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1976). Peter Mangold, *Britain and the Defeated French: From Occupation to Liberation, 1940-1944* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2012), chapter 11.

French North Africa. It is also worth revisiting the attendant tensions resulting from the American and British public revulsion at the so-called “Darlan deal,” the rhetorical arguments over which complicated an otherwise straightforward military strategy. Research by Philip Bell and T.C. Wales has identified the adverse impact on British public opinion of the arrangements made with Darlan. The legitimacy of the pro-allied resistance movements sponsored by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) also suffered.<sup>5</sup> Building on these latter studies, this chapter will focus upon the contradictions between the military expediency of working with Darlan and the public backlash that this decision caused, particularly in Britain. Specifically, it will examine how British and American foreign policy makers tried to respond to the ethical criticisms surrounding the Darlan deal while simultaneously acknowledging that such decisions represented the most strategically viable local option. Even more than previous operations against Vichy French territory, Anglo-American planners worked on a number of fronts to garner support amongst the population of metropolitan France. They also sought to secure the acquiescence of Franco’s Spain, the approval of Salazar’s Portugal, and more active support from their respective overseas territories. In addition, public sentiment within Britain remained highly critical of the agreements made with Darlan. This placed pressure upon the newly minted Anglo-American alliance and raised difficult questions about the use of censorship and moral leadership.

Orchestrating the Allied justification for carrying out the Torch invasions involved a complex array of letters, statements, leaflets and broadcasts, which attempted to anticipate – and thus to pre-empt - varying levels of dissent from numerous interested parties. Nevertheless, Ministry of Information (MOI) Home Intelligence Reports indicated that the criticism in the British mass media of the Darlan affair derived from moral qualms rather than any strategic doubts about the wisdom of the North African landings. This leads to the observation that public estimations of military progress, or indeed victory, were still measured

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Bell, “British Public Opinion and the Darlan Deal: November-December 1942,” *Journal of the British Institute in Paris*, no. 7 (1989): 71-79. T.C. Wales, “The ‘Massingham’ Mission and the Secret ‘Special Relationship’: Cooperation and Rivalry between the Anglo-American Clandestine Services in French North Africa, November 1942-May 1943,” *Intelligence and National Security* 20, no. 1 (2005): 44-71.

against certain ethical standards. More importantly, the analysis that follows illustrates that while the JPS was finalising the details of Torch, its members were working to reconcile competing military and political agendas. Doing so demanded discrete rhetorical strategies. Central to the aftermath of the invasions was the perceived need to work with Darlan, an individual who was judged to be morally compromised. More importantly, the JPS was painfully aware that this choice needed to be justified and, in some measure, played down. British official rhetoric in particular, responding to harsh criticism at home, attempted to distance British policy from any deals made with Darlan. The emphasis on American leadership and its leading role in Allied decision making about Torch was one plank of the resultant strategy. The other was equally negative, a form of damage control typified by Churchill's outright refusal to discuss the deals on the floor of the House of Commons. Both stratagems pointed to an underlying acknowledgement that the agreements made were perhaps neither as temporary nor as contingent as public and parliamentary sentiment would have liked. Explicit promises to remove Darlan from his role as head of the Algiers government could not be made in good faith.

The following analysis of the Torch operations will focus upon these dual concerns, in other words, on how the requirements of military efficiency were balanced against the ethical acceptability of the arrangements made after the landings. It will assess how each contributed to moulding the British government's rhetorical justification of the events. Given the relatively broad scope of operations, such a thematic approach will allow us to focus upon the initial concerns evident within the planning process, most notably the desire to maintain the image of American primacy within the operation, before turning to the growing British discomfort over the role played by Darlan until his assassination on 24 December 1942.

The commanders of the Anglo-American task force believed that it was of primary importance that North Africa be captured with a minimum of resistance from Vichy forces. The implications of this objective were far reaching in moulding the nature of the operation itself. In particular, this goal necessitated that Torch's senior American commanders retained great flexibility in their dealings with the Vichy officials in situ. American willingness to ultimately sanction dealings with Admiral Darlan led to sustained criticism on the part of the British public and indeed throughout parliamentary circles. In sharp

contrast to the willingness evident amongst the American press and public to accept Darlan's assistance as a matter of military necessity, the British response betrayed a deeply personal connection to the moral identity of the war. By examining the number and content of official communiqués and press releases a number of points become clear. First, there were a number of groups who were either directly affected by the invasions or were likely to have a strong opinion about them. These included the metropolitan populations within Britain and France, Vichy troops and white settlers in Algeria, and, importantly, the Soviet Union. Having entered the conflict in June 1941 following invasion by German troops, the Soviets had been pressuring the Allies to open a second front. This would remove pressure from beleaguered Soviet troops. As will become clear, Roosevelt supported rhetoric that *portrayed* Torch as an effective second front even though it fell far short of this level of commitment. More importantly, neither Churchill, Roosevelt or the CCS considered Torch to meet Soviet Leader Joseph Stalin's demands. Rhetoric, then, was used as a means to confirm wartime ideals. It was also a way to publically declare that Torch fulfilled Anglo-American commitments to their Soviet Allies.

### **Planning: A Joint but American Operation**

A second front would take pressure off of the Russians fighting in Stalingrad while also satisfying growing public demands, particularly in the United States, for a grand offensive gesture. These two considerations are key to understanding early inter-allied negotiations and later post-hoc representations of the Torch operation. Early 1942 was not short of disasters for the Allied war effort. In the Far East Malaya, the Philippines, the Dutch East Indies and Burma all fell to Japan. Losses in the Middle East to General Erwin Rommel at Tobruk in June and the annihilation of a Canadian assault force at Dieppe in August further contributed to public frustration in Britain. Only seven days after the Tobruk victory Hitler also launched a powerful summer offensive in the Soviet zone.<sup>6</sup> British operations to take Vichy Madagascar had dragged on for six months and in July of that year Churchill faced a parliamentary vote of no confidence, albeit one he passed easily. During his visit to Moscow that August Churchill faced stern pressure from Stalin for the opening of a second front.

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<sup>6</sup> Desmond Dinan, *The Politics of Persuasion: British Policy and French African Neutrality 1940-42* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 241.

While the British premier precluded a risky landing in France, he came away from the Russian capital convinced that action in 1942 was crucial in order to reassure the Soviets. So, too, did Roosevelt.<sup>7</sup> Anglo-American negotiations at the Washington-Based Arcadia Conference in December 1941 illustrated this shared desire for a successful offensive action, which needed to take place before the end of 1942.

However, the American military establishment under Secretary of War Henry Stimson was opposed to Churchill's North African policy. American Chief of Staff General George Marshall put forward American proposals for a small-scale cross-channel attack in 1942 (Operation Sledgehammer), followed by a large-scale invasion of Western Europe in 1943 (Operation Round-up). However, his British counterpart, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir Alan Brooke was notably hesitant, as was Churchill. Keith Sainsbury described these negotiations as "the last period in which a fully mobilized Britain was able to make its ideas prevail over those of a largely unmobilized United States."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Desmond Dinan depicts Torch as "almost exclusively American in Design and Execution but completely British in conception."<sup>9</sup> In actual fact, Roosevelt's personal inclination for the North African operation, as well as agreement that action in 1942 was highly desirable, also encouraged the Allies along this course of action. Churchill also attributed Head of the British Military Mission in Washington and close friend of Marshall, General John Dill, with helping to seal the North African policy.<sup>10</sup> In a meeting on 25 July 1942 the CCS agreed to focus upon first invading North Africa. A joint Anglo-American planning staff immediately set to work in drafting plans from their base at Norfolk House, London. On 14 August they appointed American General Dwight D. Eisenhower as Allied Commander in Chief and the battle-seasoned Admiral Andrew Cunningham as Allied Naval Commander Expeditionary Force. On 29 September and 2 October the American and British Chiefs of Staff (COS)

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<sup>7</sup> David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), 316.

<sup>8</sup> Sainsbury, *North African Landings*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Dinan, *Persuasion*, 240.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

approved the resulting plans and operational orders were issued on 8 October.<sup>11</sup>

As planning began in earnest that August, it became clear that the success of the landings would depend upon the level of resistance encountered from Vichy forces. Political intelligence provided by Robert D. Murphy, the U.S. State Department representative stationed in North Africa, concluded that while the British were strongly disliked in the region, the Americans were not.<sup>12</sup> This observation had two repercussions. Firstly, the CCS agreed that the event would be *represented* as American in order to avoid arousing anti-British sentiment from local forces still resentful about the clashes at Mers el-Kébir, Dakar and Syria. This decision had subsequent, and arguably beneficial, repercussions for Britain. It allowed Churchill's government to distance itself from the decision to collaborate with Darlan. Secondly, Free French<sup>13</sup> leader Charles de Gaulle was to play no part in the planning of the operation and upon Roosevelt's insistence, was not to be told of its existence until landings had taken place. Thus, the framework in which the operations were planned and carried out inextricably linked the success of Torch with the manner in which it was interpreted within North Africa. Indeed, these assumptions formed the basis upon which the planning committee prepared rhetorical justifications of the invasions prior to 8 November. Intelligence had indicated that Vichy forces were less likely to resist an American invasion. This led to the conclusion that resistance itself was not inevitable and was at least in part symbolic. Although conceivably fighting for the same cause, the Americans had not precipitated attacks on Vichy installations or supported what was in essence a rival government. Even more importantly, they were not suspected of stealing French colonial territory.

The Foreign Office concurred with the benefits of the appearance of American leadership. Information gathered by American intelligence officers suggested that servicemen's morale in North Africa was worsening due to an increasing dislike of Vichy Foreign Minister Pierre Laval (who had returned to office on 14 April 1942) and rising German demands for French food and workers. Laval's reinstatement was also a substantial blow to Franco-American

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<sup>11</sup> Captain S.W. Roskill, *The War at Sea 1939-1945*, Vol. 3, *The Period of Balance* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1956), 312.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Cunningham, *A Sailor's Odyssey* (London: Hutchinson, 1951), 478.

<sup>13</sup> Renamed the Fighting French in July 1942.



relations. The State Department recalled Vichy ambassador Admiral Leahy for consultations and the Administration suspended the supply of goods to Morocco.<sup>14</sup> However, the navy remained strongly anti-British. Although the army and air force were inclined to be more sympathetic, it was reported that they were even more pro-American.<sup>15</sup> Communications between the Foreign Office and Lord Halifax, now British Ambassador to the United States, recognised that, despite joint planning of Torch, the operation must “in its initial stages bear a predominantly American appearance.”<sup>16</sup> Churchill himself wrote to Roosevelt in late October suggesting that the American Atlantic Flotilla loan four American destroyers to sail with British units inside the Mediterranean. He believed that offensive action by the French fleet would be reduced by the presence of these tag-alongs, and the auspicious presence of the American flag.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, in the case of de Gaulle and his Fighting French movement, the British were aware that associating his cause with the invasions would only stiffen Vichy resistance. There were other problems to contend with, however. Not informing de Gaulle of Torch planning not only risked a crisis in Anglo-Gaullist relations, but threatened to “damage his prestige in Metropolitan France, where his name has a strong symbolic value as a focus of resistance...”<sup>18</sup> Set against this, Vichy’s understandable insistence on delegitimising de Gaulle and his movement had already registered tangible repercussions in past Anglo-Free French operations. At Dakar and Syria, for example, local garrisons had fought unexpectedly hard. Responding to the above report, Churchill expressed his own, rather more pessimistic belief, that both the military and civil authorities, as well as the majority of the French population within North Africa, were hostile to de Gaulle and to the British.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, there was, broadly speaking, little disagreement that the Free French

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<sup>14</sup> Dinan, *Persuasion*, 244.

<sup>15</sup> Memorandum, “Views recently expressed by Colonel Eddy, Colonel Solberg and Colonel Strong about atmosphere in French North Africa,” 27 August 1942, PREM 3/349/20B, The National Archives [henceforward TNA].

<sup>16</sup> Foreign Office to Halifax, 16 September 1942, FO 371/32134, TNA.

<sup>17</sup> Churchill to Roosevelt, C-169, 21 October 1942 in Warren F. Kimball ed., *Churchill and Roosevelt the Complete Correspondence*, vol. 1, *Alliance Emerging October 1933–November 1942* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 634.

<sup>18</sup> JPS report, “Joint Political and Economic Action with U.S. Government,” 16 August 1942, FO 371/32133, TNA.

<sup>19</sup> Churchill to Strang, 21 August 1942, FO 371/32133, TNA.

should be kept in the dark about the organisation of the Torch operation. While Churchill did suggest informing de Gaulle of the landings a few hours before they were due to take place, he was vetoed by Roosevelt, and presented little objection.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, Churchill explained to de Gaulle that he was not included in Torch because it was “a United States enterprise and a United States secret.” To placate him, Churchill planned to allow de Gaulle to announce General Paul Legentilhomme as the Governor-General of Madagascar that Friday. This latter move, Churchill informed Roosevelt, “we have been keeping for his consolation prize.”<sup>21</sup> For Roosevelt, there was never any doubt that de Gaulle should be denied any knowledge of the operation. He replied to Churchill that the announcement of the Governor General would be perfectly adequate to save de Gaulle from any embarrassment or loss of prestige.<sup>22</sup> François Kersaudy’s study of the Churchill-de Gaulle relationship identifies personal dislike, American policy towards Vichy, and a willingness to deal with other Frenchmen as key in Roosevelt’s decision. As Kersaudy concludes, “Roosevelt had disliked de Gaulle from the start, he distrusted him since Dakar, and hated him since St. Pierre et Miquelon.”<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, the Anglo-American planning committee moved forward on the assumption that the appearance of American leadership and initiative would positively affect the outcome of the Torch invasions. In the initial landings they believed that both British and Gaullist elements would compromise the ability of troops to consolidate local support quickly. Roosevelt himself was so sure of pro-American sentiment that he considered resistance to American landing personnel unlikely, a belief that would prove misguided. In the course of September and October each side began coordinating a series of press releases, broadcasts, appeals and literature that they believed would play a vital role in consolidating support for the operation in a number of crucial spheres. The informational material and statements were produced largely by

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<sup>20</sup> Alexander Cadogan, Churchill’s permanent undersecretary for Foreign Affairs wrote privately that he thought Roosevelt’s insistence that de Gaulle be told nothing until after the first landings was silly. David Dilks, ed., *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938-1945* (London: Cassell, 1971), 489.

<sup>21</sup> Churchill to Roosevelt, C-185, 5 November 1942, Kimball, *Alliance Emerging*, 660.

<sup>22</sup> Roosevelt to Churchill, 5 November 1942, PREM 3/349/20A, TNA.

<sup>23</sup> François Kersaudy, *Churchill and De Gaulle* (London: Fontana Press, 1990), 217-218.

the American side of the planning staff but were critiqued by the Foreign Office. They appealed to the white settler population within North Africa and also addressed the people of metropolitan France, drawing historic and emotive links between American intervention in 1917 and in 1942. Crucially, after some discussion, the planning staff agreed to depict Torch as a kind of second front. This decision made public the claim that the Allies were pulling their weight in the war. However, the construction of the invasions as the first step towards impending liberation and Allied victory only months after a series of bitter defeats ran into complications. Political and military aspects of the operations began to clash with public perceptions of the moral direction of the war.

### **Planning for Public Representation**

As was briefly discussed above, one of the concerns surrounding the portrayal of the North Africa operations was managing the anticipated Soviet short-term reactions. The alliance that brought the United States, Britain and the Soviet Union together was far from perfect. Britain's failure to conclude an agreement with Stalin prior to the outbreak of war, the later conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and core ideological and political differences meant that both parties continued to harbour deep suspicions over the other's wartime intentions. Stalin had placed tremendous pressure on both Roosevelt and Churchill to open a second front and thereby relieve some of the burden from the Eastern front. However, the rhetorical justification of Torch was concerned with far more than just the Soviet response. Within Britain, Home Intelligence Reports noted a worrying decline in public engagement with the conflict. This was attributed to the series of recent military disappointments.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, by late October, further reports indicated the general expectation that something was about to happen: an offensive move, "which has been anxiously awaited so long."<sup>25</sup> In addition to the British public, the American Office of War Information drafted a series of carefully crafted press releases and broadcasts. These targeted the North African population, the people of France, the American population, and the neutral states of Spain and Portugal. These latter two audiences took on special importance. The planning staff believed that by

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<sup>24</sup> Home Intelligence Weekly Report No. 107, 22 October 1942, INF 1/292, TNA.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

taking control of strategically vital French colonial territory, particularly French Morocco, the imperial sensibilities of the respective leaders in neutral Iberia, Francisco Franco and António Salazar, might be sufficiently affronted to cause them to enter the fray on the side of the Axis powers. French Morocco was at this time under the pro-Laval leadership of Resident General Charles Nogues. The preparation and content of these numerous communiqués offers further insight into the relationship between Britain and the United States, and their own complex relationship with Stalin.

Of primary importance was the broader American justification for undertaking the operations. A successful operation would minimise Vichy resistance to the invading forces. In content, it mirrored British justifications in earlier operations. Indeed, in late September the Foreign Office suggested that their colleagues at the Office of War Information should follow the British lead in preparing Roosevelt's messages to French leaders. Thematically, the American communiqués asserted that German occupation was imminent and Allied intervention was necessary and indeed inevitable to forestall such a disaster. Highly reminiscent of the operations at Dakar, one memo advised explaining the arrival of American troops as a pre-emptive salvation from German occupation, one devised "to secure this area for France at the request of patriotic Frenchmen who have called upon their friends for assistance."<sup>26</sup> In regards to ownership, however, early communiqués stressed that the invasions were primarily American in nature. The British played a supporting role in the air and through naval action. No mention would be made of the use of British ground troops, a decision which again pointed to the belief that Anglophobic sentiment within North Africa could have a major adverse impact upon the course of the operation.

The first two documents earmarked for release after the operation commenced were an initial military communiqué and a broadcast message to the French people recorded in French by Roosevelt. The Foreign Office didn't think much of Roosevelt's recording, which they described as, at most, intelligible. This initial communication argued predictably that the operations

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<sup>26</sup> "Suggested Points to be Included in the President's Messages to French Leaders," 23 September 1942, FO 371/32134, TNA.

had become necessary in order to deal with the threat of Axis incursion.<sup>27</sup> Roosevelt's broadcast was to be issued simultaneously with the military communiqué and was addressed to both France and French North Africa. The Foreign Office felt that it was crucial not to address the local population of French North Africa in a separate address. Historic anti-imperial American rhetoric might lead Vichy to suspect, or at least accuse America of fostering local independence movements.<sup>28</sup> Edits to the American documents, largely requested by the Foreign Office, demonstrated that although official British policy was willing to prioritise the American complexion of the operation at its inception, they were insistent upon maintaining and receiving credit for the landings as a joint endeavour once British troops had also established themselves on the ground. Roosevelt's initial broadcast to the French people made no reference to British forces and was given only in the name of the United States. Following Foreign Office requests, a line was modified to make reference to the United Nations. This would allow the British more easily to explain their role in later communiqués.<sup>29</sup> The address now read: "The Americans, with the help of the United Nations, are doing all that they can to ensure a sound future, as well as the restitution of ideals, of liberties and of democracy to all those who have lived under the Tricolour."<sup>30</sup>

In addition to the initial American releases, a British statement would follow, expressing full support for American actions. A joint Anglo-American communiqué in the form of a broadcast and a mass consumption leaflet was aimed exclusively at metropolitan France. The two Allies hoped to forestall any premature attempts within the metropole to try and overthrow the Germans. They believed this would only provoke total occupation. The communications urged the people of metropolitan France to "remain calm but on the alert," as "we enter today, into the offensive phase of the War of Liberation."<sup>31</sup> Roosevelt himself attached primary importance to the need to carry French opinion on the side of American operations. Sensitive to the closeness of past American

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<sup>27</sup> "French Text of First American Communiqué," 6 November 1942, PREM 3/437/1, TNA.

<sup>28</sup> "Suggested Points for Presidential Proclamation," 23 September 1942, FO 371/32134, TNA.

<sup>29</sup> Minutes by C.N. Stirling, 16 October 1942, FO 371/32135, TNA.

<sup>30</sup> Text of Roosevelt's Broadcast, 5 November 1942, PREM 3/437/1, TNA.

<sup>31</sup> Joint American and British declaration to French people, 4 November 1942, PREM 3/437/1, TNA.

diplomatic relations with Vichy, Marshall stressed that no direct statement be made - or line be taken - towards Vichy, and that policy should be portrayed only as working towards the "defeat of the axis powers and the preservation of French administration in the colonies."<sup>32</sup> The Allied messages attempted to lend symbolic greatness to the invasions by representing them as a liberating force and indeed portraying Torch as a turning point (the offensive phase) in the conflict.

It is worth addressing in greater detail how the content of Allied communiqués aimed to represent the invasions in two ways. First, they were strategically inevitable. Secondly, they were a step towards the moral renewal of nations previously under Axis control. The Foreign Office suggested to the Office of War Information that in order to consolidate French support, it would be crucial to point out the role that Germany was playing in the destruction of their beloved nation and its empire. A part of this plan meant disassociating the French population from such a betrayal, "in which they had no voice whatsoever and against which they had protested at the cost of lives and suffering."<sup>33</sup> Arguments citing German abuses of French rights, particularly those linked to collaboration for the economic strengthening of Germany should be used to demonstrate "the German plan to destroy France morally, as in other fields she is endeavouring to destroy her physically."<sup>34</sup> The British communiqué in support of American action likewise described the operations as leading to the restoration of "the independence and greatness of France."<sup>35</sup> These writings attributed to France emotive characteristics such as greatness and morality, but only through association with Allied forces. In this area, unlike the Levant, local voices mattered very little because there was much less of an immediate threat of coherent nationalist action. Instead, by calling upon Vichy forces to lay down their arms, the Allies also portrayed themselves as a benign force, which had no designs upon French sovereignty or imperial rights.

A joint Anglo-American document on psychological warfare aimed at France and the French Empire drew on historic links between the United States and

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<sup>32</sup> Marshall to Eisenhower, 13 October 1942, FO 371/32135, TNA.

<sup>33</sup> "Suggested Lines of Propaganda for O.W.I.," 25 September 1942, FO 371/32134, TNA.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Draft Statement, "British Statement to be issued in support of U.S. broadcast," October 1942, FO 371/32135, TNA.

France in order to remind the latter that Americans could surely be trusted to keep their word, particularly when it came to French colonial rights. This would, however, develop into a sticking point with the Foreign Office. They viewed repeated American promises to guard the French empire as offensive to their own guarantees. The offending paragraph of the document pledged the United States to proving “that Great Britain’s assurances that French territory will be restored are fully supported in fact, law and morality by the pledged word of the American Government and People.”<sup>36</sup> As has been clear, previous operations involving French colonial territory and the French fleet had led to a resurgence of imperial rivalry. Accusations on this front had originated from both Vichy and Gaullist sources and Anglo-French relations were at the same time deteriorating in the Levant. Nevertheless, pledges that appeared to insinuate British bad faith were an unacceptable challenge to British credibility and prestige.

Some American rhetoric however, continued to rely on historic sentiment that focussed exclusively on the past Franco-American relationship, to the detriment of their British partners. Foreign secretary Anthony Eden described the American attitude towards France as the “Lafayette problem.” He believed that the Americans thought that they knew better how to deal with the French than their British counterparts.<sup>37</sup> Certainly, despite the joint nature of the above document, leaflets and communiqués contained scant reference to British contributions. Specifically, Annexe III called for the dropping of an eight-page folder over unoccupied France, which was “strongly emotional – recalling by photographic illustrations, U.S.A.’s participation in France 1917-1918.”<sup>38</sup> The emphasis remained upon American troops. Instructions for the media stated that accounts of the landings should avoid drawing attention to any resistance and “give the impression that our forces landed as allies.” They attempted to create an image of Franco-American cooperation and partnership where British attempts had failed.<sup>39</sup> Earlier, Roosevelt had refused Churchill’s request to drop leaflets in North Africa explaining the use of British ground forces. Churchill’s

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<sup>36</sup> Foreign Office to U.S. Major R. Le Mesurier, 17 October 1942, FO 371/32135, TNA.

<sup>37</sup> Mangold, *Defeated French*, 158.

<sup>38</sup> “Annexes to working plan for psychological warfare for France and the French Empire,” October 1942, FO 898/131, TNA.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

reluctant acquiescence in the matter highlighted further the extent of American control over initial rhetoric in the Torch operations.<sup>40</sup>

During the final preparations for the landings, Roosevelt shared a press release with Churchill. It was written for consumption by the American public. Of course, this release and the others aimed at specific sections of the population all found their way into the British press. But it was this communiqué that set the tone for overall interpretations of the invasions. Most notably, it described the landings as the key turning point in the war and attributed the bulk of the credit to the Americans, despite making reference for the first time to future British ground reinforcement.<sup>41</sup> There was also a return to the question of the second front. British ambassador in Moscow A. Clark Kerr wrote to the Foreign Office as early as 17 October with his own advice for Torch. "When it comes to its psychological effect upon the Russian people, which we must naturally wish to be important and stimulating, [it] will depend largely, if not entirely, upon the way in which the operation is presented to them."<sup>42</sup> However, early Political Warfare Executive analyses concluded that portrayals of Torch as a second front would not be credible. Rather, the operations should be presented as a *step towards* a second front.<sup>43</sup>

Even the original propaganda directive issued by the Foreign Office was clear in stating that the invasions should not be referred to as a second front. However, this directive was altered after Roosevelt submitted his own press release.<sup>44</sup> Roosevelt himself expressed to Churchill in late October his desire to be able to make the argument to Stalin, that obligations towards the Soviet Union had been met.<sup>45</sup> The American release blatantly characterised the invasions as providing "effective Second Front assistance to our heroic Allies in Russia."<sup>46</sup> Such an approach had benefits for Britain as well. Such a confident statement could quiet Soviet frustration with what was perceived to be British

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<sup>40</sup> Churchill to Roosevelt, 6 November 1942, PREM 3/437/3, TNA. Minute, Eden to Churchill, 21 October 1942, FO 371/32135, TNA.

<sup>41</sup> Roosevelt to Churchill, 27 October 1942, PREM 3/437/1, TNA.

<sup>42</sup> Moscow to Foreign Office, 17 October 1942, PREM 3/439/20A, TNA.

<sup>43</sup> "Appreciation of the political warfare situation in Western Europe in the light of Torch," 15 October 1942, FO 371/32135, TNA.

<sup>44</sup> "General propaganda directive for Torch," 3 November 1942, FO 371/32136, TNA.

<sup>45</sup> Roosevelt to Churchill, R-202, 27 October 1942, Kimball, *Alliance Emerging*, 653.

<sup>46</sup> Roosevelt to Churchill, 27 October 1942, PREM 3/437/1, TNA.



cowardice over their refusal to attack the German rear.<sup>47</sup> Churchill wrote to Eden and Permanent Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs Alexander Cadogan that he believed such a reference would get them out of a tight spot with their Eastern allies.<sup>48</sup> The conscious decision to portray the North African operations as a fulfilment of Soviet demands illustrated the importance of presentation in foreign policy. Torch would be the first major joint Anglo-American operation. More importantly, it would be the first time that the British ceded so much operational and rhetorical initiative to their new ally. However, Eisenhower and Cunningham soon found themselves reacting to a situation on the ground that was vastly different from what they had anticipated. This would force the Allies to justify highly controversial and unforeseen decisions.

### **Dealing with Darlan**

In the early morning hours of 8 November Torch operations commenced. There were three main points of attack: Algiers, Oran and Casablanca. The attack was comprised of approximately 70,000 British and American assault troops and at Algiers and Oran included a maritime force of 340 British ships.<sup>49</sup> The operations at Casablanca were carried out entirely by American troops. Prior to arriving, British ships had been forced to pass through the narrow (only eight miles in width) Straights of Gibraltar. Cunningham believed this endeavour was one of the riskiest of the operation.<sup>50</sup> Eisenhower recorded that although the landings at Algiers met with almost no opposition, resistance from local naval forces at Oran was particularly stiff.<sup>51</sup> He hoped that his deputy commander, General Mark Clark, who Cunningham described as having a “rather predatory-looking nose”<sup>52</sup> had been successful in attempting to contact and win over the French military authorities after being landed west of Algiers just prior to the attacks.<sup>53</sup> More importantly, and crucial for understanding the reasoning behind later decisions, was Eisenhower’s firm belief that a military occupation of French

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<sup>47</sup> Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (London: Pimlico, 2006), 123.

<sup>48</sup> Churchill to Eden and Cadogan, 30 October 1942, PREM 3/437/3, TNA.

<sup>49</sup> Roskill, *Period of Balance*, 313, 320.

<sup>50</sup> Cunningham, *Sailor’s Odyssey*, 475.

<sup>51</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1952), 103.

<sup>52</sup> Cunningham, *Sailor’s Odyssey*, 477.

<sup>53</sup> Roskill, *Period of Balance*, 322.

North Africa was simply not feasible. It would be too costly in terms of men and materials.<sup>54</sup>

General Henri Giraud, who the British submarine *Sibyl* had embarked from a beach near Toulon on the night of 6 November, had sterling credentials after escaping from a German prisoner of war camp earlier that April. Personally loyal to Vichy leader Marshal Philippe Pétain but strongly anti-German his credentials seemed ideal to take up leadership in Algiers.<sup>55</sup> He was to be virtually installed by the Allies in the wake of the operation. However, increasing resistance, even against American troops, coupled with the fact that the “King Pin” was not only unrecognised, but also quite unpopular, called these earlier assumptions into question. Darlan’s unanticipated presence in North Africa during the invasions led to his involvement in negotiations to stem fighting and encouraged Allied hopes that the fleet and Dakar would soon also join their side. Eisenhower, echoing the sentiment of other military reports at the time, argued that the mentality in North Africa was completely different from what he had anticipated. “Any proposal was acceptable only if “the Marshall would wish it.””<sup>56</sup> During communications with the CCS he went as far as to advise that due to Giraud’s non-recognition, publication of his name in North Africa should be avoided.<sup>57</sup>

Eisenhower’s belief that only Darlan had the public credibility to issue orders in the name of Pétain was swiftly criticised throughout the British, and to a lesser extent, the American media. Darlan’s involvement with the Allies also divided opinion within the French metropole and contributed to furthering the Anglo-Gaullist rift. The basis of these responses was that such “collaboration” was not fitting with the type of moral war that the Allies claimed to be fighting. De Gaulle himself took full advantage of his exclusion from the operations to place himself on the moral high ground and garner support and sympathy from the broader public. Responses to the landings released through the French National Committee<sup>58</sup> (CNF) were scathing and clearly distinguished between Gaullist elements and Allied actions. Broadly, there were three main time

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<sup>54</sup> Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, 110.

<sup>55</sup> Julian Jackson, *France the Dark Years, 1940-1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 222.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>57</sup> Eisenhower to Combined Chiefs of Staff, 14 November 1942, FO 371/32138, TNA.

<sup>58</sup> Formed in September 1941 to replace the Empire Defence Council.

frames over which the operations – and the wider public reactions to them – took place. These included: the initial reaction to the invasions, further reactions following the 13 November agreement making Darlan head of the civil government and Giraud head of armed forces, and, finally, the responses to the 22 November signing of the Clark-Darlan agreement. This latter agreement put an end to French resistance and made Darlan High Commissioner of French North Africa.

The commencement of the landings set off a flurry of planned media activity as radio addresses by Roosevelt and Eisenhower were broadcast, British assurances of full support and backing were issued and leaflets delivered to metropolitan France. Vichy would of course issue its own counter argument, immediately calling on its citizens not to be fooled by foreign radio addresses. These communications reminded listeners that the source of the attacks was, shockingly, a nation for which France had once shed its own blood.<sup>59</sup> Notably, despite Allied attempts to depict events as American, Vichy press responses immediately identified the “*agression*” as perpetrated by both American and British forces. Pétain’s response (written by Laval) to Roosevelt’s personal message was printed throughout the press, and focussed, as always upon creating an image of solemn duty towards the defence of the empire against all aggression.<sup>60</sup> Vichy’s rhetoric remained consistent with earlier responses to British territorial incursions. Such an approach drew upon themes of duty and honour based upon depictions of the binding legalistic nature of the armistice and the heroic if weary figure of Pétain.

Concepts of obedience, and similarly honour in duty, were mainstays of Vichy rhetoric. This tendency drew upon traditional cultures of loyalty, particularly within the armed services, and recalled Pétain’s 1940 argument that only a metropolitan government could be considered a legitimate French government. Although *Le Temps* reported progress towards agreements in North Africa, headlines focused upon the valour of soldiers in doing their duty: “*obeissant à l’ordre du chef de l’état nos soldats et nos marins font vaillamment*

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<sup>59</sup> “Communiqué du Gouvernement Français,” 8 November 1942, 9GMII/273, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, [Henceforward MAE]. “Un appel du gouvernement à la discipline et à l’union,” *Le Temps*, 9 November 1942, 1.

<sup>60</sup> “Les Américains et les Anglais attaquent notre Afrique du Nord,” *Le Temps*, 9 November 1942, 1.

*leur devoir*.”<sup>61</sup> This excerpt emphasises the importance of not only having a strong leader, but in trusting and following his orders. Another article, centred upon the tragedy of events, again justified Pétain’s response as in fitting with the “obligations” imposed upon France by the armistice. These obligations necessitated the protection of the empire.<sup>62</sup> The broad failure of *L’Echo d’Alger* to employ a similar kind of rhetoric, however, was understandable. It now urged civilians to remain calm and imparted news of negotiations for an armistice.<sup>63</sup> *L’Echo* would, throughout the operations, remain sympathetic to events on the ground and supportive of the new Darlan administration. The German occupation of the Southern Zone of metropolitan France from 11 November and subsequent scuttling of the French ships at Toulon on 27 November, however, saw news split between on going reports of Anglo-American operations and Pétain’s protests against German violations of the Armistice. Even at this juncture, Pétain’s communiqués presented German moves as strategic, and indeed defensible, rather than an incursion upon French sovereignty.<sup>64</sup> The French metropolitan press, nonetheless, became increasingly difficult to maintain. Even in the days immediately following Torch communiqués with information from the operations were two days behind. *Le Temps* discontinued its paper from 30 November.

Within Britain, initial press responses were unsurprisingly positive. Contrary to Vichy, they remained consistent in depicting the landings as American and recorded the lack of resistance to their forces as proof that French elements “had no desire to oppose the entry of American troops into this territory.”<sup>65</sup> Home Intelligence Reports covering 4-10 November described growing jubilation following events in North Africa. Not only had criticism on almost all matters declined, but this period was described as “the best week of the war,” with spirits rising “to fresh heights over the Anglo-American landings in

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<sup>61</sup> “L’attaque Américaine et Anglaise contre notre Afrique du Nord: Obeissant a l’ordre du chef de l’etat nos soldats et nos marins font vaillamment leur devoir,” *Le Temps*, 9 November 1942, 1.

<sup>62</sup> “Les heures tragiques,” *Le Temps*, 9 November 1942, 1.

<sup>63</sup> “Des conversations en vue de la signature d’une convention d’armistice sont en cours,” *L’Echo d’Alger*, 10 November 1942, 1.

<sup>64</sup> “Les troupes Allemandes traversent la zone libre pour aller occuper des positions de défense sur la côte méditerranéenne,” *Le Temps*, 12 November 1942, 1.

<sup>65</sup> “Rapid U.S. Advance in North Africa,” *The Times*, 9 November 1942, 4.; “Americans Advancing Rapidly,” *The Guardian*, 9 November 1942, 5.

French North Africa: they are now descried as at a higher level then “since the war began.”<sup>66</sup> Notably, the same report cited the overwhelming belief that resisting French forces should not be given leniency.<sup>67</sup> This attitude was consistent with previous operations against Vichy French forces, in which public sentiment in Britain maintained a strongly negative connotation of Vichy elements, and indeed the French metropole more broadly. These attitudes were linked to ideas of betrayal and collaboration. Certainly, following the total German occupation of France, a string of Home Intelligence indicated little sympathy for the French plight. Four reports cited blatant mistrust or dislike of these former allies, “particularly amongst men who served in the last war.”<sup>68</sup> In addition to downplaying the amount of resistance met by Anglo-French forces, British press responses also portrayed a huge amount of support for General Giraud, as “a gallant and skilful military leader.”<sup>69</sup> Despite noted uncertainty and a lack of information surrounding Darlan’s whereabouts and position, the press hailed Giraud’s assumption of the “leadership of the French movement to prevent Axis aggression in North Africa.”<sup>70</sup>

Only three days after the initial invasion, reports that Darlan had issued a cease-fire and begun negotiations were arriving at Whitehall courtesy of the SOE unit stationed at Gibraltar.<sup>71</sup> Resistance at the Algiers harbour had ended by 19.00 on 8 November.<sup>72</sup> However, news of developing arrangements was notably absent from the press, which expressed puzzlement over Darlan’s current position but lacked any substantial information.<sup>73</sup> Writing to W.H.B. Mack, British Civil Liaison Office to Eisenhower, Cadogan warned of the danger of working with Darlan, asserting that “If Darlan would give us [the] fleet and Tunisia, I should be very grateful – and then throw him down a deep well.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Home Intelligence Weekly Report, 12 November 1942, INF 1/292, TNA.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Home Intelligence Weekly Report, 19 November 1942, INF 1/292, TNA.

<sup>69</sup> Diplomatic Correspondent, “Allies Speak to France,” *The Times*, 9 November 1942, 4.

<sup>70</sup> “U.S. Request for Passage through Tunisia,” *The Guardian*, 10 November 1942, 5. “Stop Press News: General Giraud,” *The Guardian*, 10 November 1942, 6.

<sup>71</sup> “Torch and the S.O.E. Signals Stations at Gibraltar,” 11 November 1942, HS 7/68, TNA. Communiqué Vichy, 11 November 1942, 9GMII/273, MAE.

<sup>72</sup> Roskill, *Period of Balance*, 325.

<sup>73</sup> Diplomatic Correspondent, “Puzzle of Darlan’s Attitude: What is Happening at Toulon?” *The Guardian*, 13 November 1942, 5.

<sup>74</sup> Cadogan, *Diaries*, 492.

Although this was a view allegedly shared by Churchill, it became increasingly evident that Darlan had little ability to deliver on either of these fronts.<sup>75</sup> His 11 November message to Admiral de Laborde, commander of the French fleet at Toulon, failed to convince him to join the Allies.<sup>76</sup> In *The Times*, news of Darlan's new role on 16 November was communicated alongside the assumption that "no doubt the status is only temporary..."<sup>77</sup> *The Times* itself would, alongside the government line, maintain a relatively neutral stance until mid-December even if public sentiment remained uneasy.<sup>78</sup> *The Guardian*, less willing to refrain from criticism, nevertheless shunted blame onto American policymakers, writing, "this country has had virtually no part in the political arrangements made by Allied headquarters."<sup>79</sup> The Foreign Office instructed Washington Ambassador, Lord Halifax on 13 November to make it clear to Roosevelt or Secretary of State Cordell Hull that unless Darlan was able to deliver the French Navy, his inclusion in the North African administration would be highly unpopular.<sup>80</sup> Eden, who remained solidly against working with Darlan, gave a second statement to Halifax on 17 November, which stated, "We are fighting for international decency, and Darlan is the antithesis of this."<sup>81</sup> The Foreign Office remained insistent that "justification of such policy is almost impossible."<sup>82</sup> The stance within this office was clear. Although there were military benefits to working with Darlan, his reputation as a collaborator made it less than desirable to associate him with the Allied war cause. In recognising the public backlash that was likely to accrue from this relationship, the above officials recognised the role that popular opinion played in the political sphere. At the root of this recognition was the idea that justificatory rhetoric could be employed in an attempt to influence it.

Close press analysis by the CNF revealed growing sympathy in the British press for de Gaulle's movement and universal disgust over the

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<sup>75</sup> Woodward, *Foreign Policy*, 212.

<sup>76</sup> Roskill, *Period of Balance*, 337.

<sup>77</sup> Diplomatic Correspondent, "France under the Heel," *The Times*, 16 November 1942, 4.

<sup>78</sup> Kersaudy, *Churchill and De Gaulle*, 232.

<sup>79</sup> Diplomatic Correspondent, "De Gaulle and Darlan: A "Disclaimer" No Parley with Vichy Regime," *The Guardian*, 17 November 1942, 5.

<sup>80</sup> Foreign Office to Halifax, 13 November 1942, FO 371/32138, TNA.

<sup>81</sup> Woodward, *Foreign Policy* 215.

<sup>82</sup> Foreign Office to Halifax, 17 November 1942, FO 371/32138, TNA.

“disturbing” events unfolding.<sup>83</sup> The leading article of the press organ of the Fighting French unreservedly criticised Darlan, and was reprinted by *The Guardian*. It drew upon increasingly familiar themes, repudiating Darlan “in the name of morality, of patriotism, of democracy and of just laws.”<sup>84</sup> Home Intelligence again highlighted a growing sense of moral injustice, which focussed very specifically on Darlan’s privileged position under the arrangements made in Algiers. Not only did no one display any trust for Darlan in light of his much publicised indiscretions, one respondent asserted, “General Eisenhower had better not trust Darlan further than he can throw a piano.”<sup>85</sup> Linked to this distrust was the feeling that de Gaulle was being treated unfairly. The British press praised de Gaulle’s broadcast over the BBC on 8 November, which implored those in French North Africa to rise up and fight against their oppressors for “la salut de la Patrie”<sup>86</sup> A week later, in a meeting on 16 November, de Gaulle implored Churchill to reconsider Darlan’s position. He expressed his surprise that the British would allow themselves to be led by the Americans in such an endeavour and urged Churchill to “take over the moral direction of this war.”<sup>87</sup> De Gaulle’s argument highlighted the existence of two competing motivations governing the direction of Torch. The first was to put an end to fighting on the ground, using whatever resources were available, including the assistance of Darlan. The second recognised that public support back in the metropole, which was hostile to the idea of working with “collaborators,” was also an important way to measure the success of an operation. Although the former course of action largely prevailed, de Gaulle’s argument illustrated the various ways in which wartime success was measured. He stressed that should Churchill choose to publicly take steps to move away from Darlan, all of world public opinion would stand behind him,<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Telegramme, CNF, Presse Britannique, 21 November 1942, 18GMII/135, MAE.

<sup>84</sup> “Aim to Avoid Bloodshed,” *The Guardian*, 18 November 1942, 5.

<sup>85</sup> Home Intelligence Weekly Reports, 19 November 1942, INF 1/292, TNA.

<sup>86</sup> De Gaulle BBC, 8 November 1942, 18GMII/129, MAE.

<sup>87</sup> Kersaudy, *Churchill and De Gaulle*, 226.

<sup>88</sup> “Proces-Verbal de l’Entretien du General de Gaulle avec le Premier Ministre,” 16 November 1942, 3AG 1/257, Archives Nationales [Henceforward AN].

In the French metropole, headlines largely turned to attempts to clarify the consequences of “l’agression anglo-américaine.”<sup>89</sup> By 16 November, the French press was beginning to publish the news that Darlan was acting in opposition to Pétain’s repeated orders to resist. He was criticised over his continued claims to act in the name of the French head of state.<sup>90</sup> *Le Temps* published Pétain’s 14 November message to Darlan, ordering him to defend North Africa against “l’agression américaine” and telling him not to act against Axis forces.<sup>91</sup> Giraud was also accused of betraying Pétain.<sup>92</sup> This portrayal was in sharp contrast to the Algiers press, which was now writing from a pro-Allied perspective, publishing a large photo of Giraud under the caption, “Un Grand Soldat.”<sup>93</sup> While the North African press was moving towards the Allied camp, in mainland France, Pétain had just ceded his administrative powers to Laval. Under Act 12 Laval was now able to enact laws under his own signature. Meanwhile, difficult questions over the present deal with Darlan began to emerge insistently, particularly from British diplomatic circles. Minutes submitted by Foreign Office Official and head of the Reconstruction Department Gladwyn Jebb argued that while military expediency may lend credibility to the agreements, the moral aspect of the decision, “perhaps in the long run is even more important.”<sup>94</sup> For example, one historian has argued that the agreements with Darlan led to Allied clandestine groups SOE and OSS facing a “moral hazard” by jeopardising their perceived validity in the eyes of other European resistance movements.<sup>95</sup> This course of action struck hard at British moral credibility, particularly in their relations with other nations who were living under German occupation. It was also highly inconsistent with previous portrayals of the war, which depicted the British struggle as a righteous one. De Gaulle warned Eden that the effects of the agreements had been disastrous amongst

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<sup>89</sup> “Les conséquences de l’agression Anglo-Américaine,” *Le Temps*, 14-15 November 1942, 1.

<sup>90</sup> “Les déclarations mensongères de l’amiral Darlan,” *Le Temps*, 22 November 1942, 1.

<sup>91</sup> “Un télégramme du Maréchal à l’amiral Darlan et un ordre à l’armée d’Afrique,” *Le Temps*, 16 November 1942, 1. “L’amiral Darlan a pris des initiatives contraires aux instructions du Maréchal,” *Le Temps*, 16 November 1942, 1.

<sup>92</sup> “La felonie du General Giraud,” *Le Temps*, 17 November 1942, 1.

<sup>93</sup> “Un grand soldat, le général Giraud commandant en chef les forces terrestres et aériennes de l’Afrique française,” *L’Echo d’Alger*, 17 November 1942, 1.

<sup>94</sup> Minutes, Gladwyn Jebb, 16 November 1942, FO 371/32139, TNA.

<sup>95</sup> Wales, “‘Massingham’ Mission,” 53.



the population of the whole of Metropolitan France.<sup>96</sup> The Torch operations, and particularly their extended aftermath can only be fully understood by viewing the tension between these arguments of military expediency and moral compromise. The validity of such a compromise had real consequences for policy makers, forcing them to choose how strong a stance to take in their recognition that the agreements were far from ideal. At the same time, they realised that events on the ground left little room for manoeuvre both as a matter of military expediency and American preference.

Clearly, Churchill faced criticism over the deal, despite the fact that the local press continued to portray it as a broadly American decision. Writing to Roosevelt on 17 November, Churchill argued that any deals with Darlan must “only be a temporary expedient justifiable solely by the stress of battle.”<sup>97</sup> Roosevelt responded by issuing a press release that practically copied this line. In it he also argued that by working with Darlan, the Allies were saving time and casualties by avoiding a “mopping up period”.<sup>98</sup> *The Times* responded favourably to Roosevelt’s statements, emphasising the agreement’s temporary and local nature alongside the tangible military benefits it conferred such as additional time to prepare for an eastward advance into Tunisia and the loss of life averted by a rapid ceasefire.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, the following day it printed another article, which drew on American Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles’ analysis of events. In both a subtle critique of policy and a blame shift onto the Americans, the article criticised Welles for making “no direct reference to the bewilderment and disappointment expressed in Fighting French and some other quarters over allied acceptance of the aid of Darlan...”<sup>100</sup> Reactions in *The Guardian* to Roosevelt’s assurances of a temporary arrangement remained scornful of Darlan. They made comparisons with 19<sup>th</sup> century political opportunist Joseph Fouché: “Fouché never did a quicker turn.”<sup>101</sup> However, it

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<sup>96</sup> Eden to Peake, 19 November 1942, FO 371/31951, TNA.

<sup>97</sup> Churchill to Roosevelt, C-193, 17 November 1942, Warren F. Kimball, ed., *Churchill and Roosevelt the Complete Correspondence*, vol. 2, *Alliance Forged* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 7.

<sup>98</sup> Roosevelt to Churchill, R-214, 17 November 1942, Kimball, *Alliance Forged*, 8.

<sup>99</sup> Our Correspondent, “Local Status of Darlan,” *The Times*, 18 November 1942, 4.

<sup>100</sup> Our Correspondent, “Mr. Welles on the Final Conquest,” *The Times*, 19 November 1942, 3.

<sup>101</sup> “The Darlan Mystery,” *The Guardian*, 18 November 1942, 4.

became increasingly clear that despite attempts to calm public criticism within Britain, the political situation in North Africa remained uncertain, as did the actual length of the “temporary” expedient. Darlan himself made it clear to General Clark that he interpreted Roosevelt’s use of the word ‘temporary’ as meaning “until the liberation of France is complete.”<sup>102</sup> Herein lay the difficulty of attempting to acknowledge public sentiment while simultaneously focussing on military strategy. South African Field-Marshal Jan Smuts acknowledged this problem in a letter to Churchill sent from Gibraltar on 22 November. He reported that the present military situation might call for Darlan’s retention for a “fairly long period,” and warned that any “impression[s] to the contrary should not be publicly created.”<sup>103</sup>

Churchill would, in his private communications with Roosevelt, repeatedly emphasise the need to alleviate criticism that painted Allied actions as immoral. The conflict with Germany had, on the Allied side, always been described as a noble struggle against tyranny and darkness. Allowing Darlan into the Allied camp was a sharp departure from this stance and risked jeopardising Churchill’s credibility. One such communication argued: “A permanent arrangement with Darlan or the formation of a Darlan government in French North Africa would not be understood by the great masses of ordinary people whose simply loyalties are our strength.”<sup>104</sup> Churchill’s rhetoric had consistently portrayed the British, and later the Allied struggle through a straightforward framework of good vs. evil. Such understandings, however, were in actuality quite complex, and carried deep connotations based on morality and the acceptability of punitive action. This point is illustrated below through a related event that clarifies the basis upon which Darlan was rejected as a valid Allied contributor.

First, at the same time as the Darlan affair, there were strong negative reactions towards images of the commander of the British Eighth Army, General Bernard Montgomery, entertaining the German General Wilhelm von Thoma. Von Thoma had been captured outside of El Alamein on 4 November. Home Intelligence Reports summarised sentiment towards the man who was responsible for the Guernica massacre as having “increased the distaste felt at

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<sup>102</sup> Minutes, W. Strang citing 21 November letter from Darlan to Clark, 26 November 1942, FO 371/32145, TNA.

<sup>103</sup> Smuts to Churchill, 22 November 1942, PREM 3/442/9, TNA.

<sup>104</sup> Kimball, *Alliance Forged*, 7.

treating him as if he were the captain of an opposing cricket team.” In the same report, there was a strong sense that it was not only desirable, but also right to “punish” those who had broken a moral code. This idea of acceptable retribution was represented by repeated calls for Britain to launch a series of punitive bombing raids on Italy. “The Italians supported Mussolini, just as the Germans supported Hitler, and the only thing to do with them is to hit them hard and tell them there is more to come.”<sup>105</sup> Such sentiments framed the war through a deeply personal understanding, allowing for punishment and retribution in certain instances. It would also form the basis of the public reaction against the Darlan affair. The same British public that was able to justify the bombardments at Mers el-Kébir as a necessary act towards a just victory failed to accept arguments of military expediency on the basis of immorality, and indeed, a deep sense of unfairness.

During this period, commentary by presenter Ed Murrow from London, although broadcast for American listeners, received sympathetic press coverage in British papers. Murrow reported that although the British press and radio were following government instructions to emphasise the military nature of the agreements, public opinion disparaged the move. He quoted one man as saying, “We shouldn’t have done it. We shouldn’t have done it not even if he brought his tupenny navy with him.”<sup>106</sup> Crucially, he too emphasised the nature of the agreements as “a matter of high principle in which we carry a great moral burden which we cannot escape.”<sup>107</sup> Such criticisms were consistent with a broader Allied construction and understanding of the conflict. They emphasised deeply ingrained cultural ideals such as fair play and drew on ethical standards that allowed for punishment, and causalities as long as they stayed within the perceived confines of a “moral” war. In such a situation, de Gaulle found himself rising in popularity, not as a result of his military accomplishment, but because of his apparent moral credibility. His published communiqué, stating that the CNF was not currently and would not in future play any part in negotiations

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<sup>105</sup> Home Intelligence Weekly Report, 26 November 1942, INF 1/292, TNA.

<sup>106</sup> Commentary by Ed Murrow from London, C.B.S. Network in English for U.S.A., 25 November 1942, FO 371/32155, TNA.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

under way, effectively separated this group from unsavoury dealings with former Vichy officials.<sup>108</sup>

Churchill wrote, in his extensive review of the war years, an account that almost seemed to exonerate Darlan by arguing that the agreement concluded by Clark and Eisenhower, displayed “a high level of courage and good sense.”<sup>109</sup> Nevertheless, he also acknowledged that the decisions had raised many “issues of a moral and sentimental character.”<sup>110</sup> Churchill was in a difficult situation throughout the operations, as he attempted to maintain good relations between the Americans, the Free French and his own constituents. Increasing pressure from both the mass media and political quarters like the Foreign Office had made it difficult to take a clear line on present circumstances. The press was dominated by discussion over Darlan, which even eclipsed the publication of the Beveridge Report on 1 December.<sup>111</sup> Roosevelt’s “temporary expedient” announcement may have briefly alleviated criticism in the press. However, as events continued to evolve in favour of Darlan, particularly following the conclusion of the Clark-Darlan agreement, criticism once again dominated the mass media throughout December. De Gaulle himself continued to profit from extended press criticism. He expressed pleasure at the critical and moral stance being taken by the London press in an internal communication.<sup>112</sup> However, following Roosevelt’s statement, there appeared to be an increasing gap between the relative willingness of British and American public opinion to acquiesce in the current state of affairs. The final section will focus upon this development alongside rising criticism from the British Parliamentary sphere. It will examine how official British rhetoric avoided taking a strong stance despite mounting press criticism. This was largely in response to the growing recognition that there was little alternative but to continue working with Darlan.

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<sup>108</sup> Communiqué du Comité National Français, 16 November 1942, 18GMII/129, MAE. Foreign Office to Halifax, 16 November 1942, FO 371/31951, TNA.

<sup>109</sup> Churchill, *Hinge of Fate*, 565.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Bell, “British Public Opinion,” 76.

<sup>112</sup> “Communication à tout les postes, presse,” 25 November 1942, 18GMII/135, MAE.

### **Constrained by Events on the Ground**

The ultimately protracted nature of the North African operations, a situation brought about by determined German resistance and the arrival of Wehrmacht reinforcements in Tunisia, remained overshadowed by sustained press coverage and public interest in the Darlan affair throughout late November and into December. The British press used de Gaulle's statements to condemn the Darlan regime as unconstitutional and his actions as treasonous. One publication of *The Guardian* in late November argued that Darlan's position as an officer made his actions even more insidious than Laval's.<sup>113</sup> Home Intelligence Reports summarised the general sentiment in Britain: "...it is doubted whether "even the expediency of military necessity" can have justified this stratagem."<sup>114</sup> The same report listed the top three reactions to the affair as increased sympathy for de Gaulle, placement of responsibility on the Americans and questions about what the future held.<sup>115</sup> As discussed previously, increased solidarity with de Gaulle and the Fighting French was a direct response to the belief that he had been taken advantage of.

Later reports added that, even in areas such as Portsmouth where the Gaullist movement was very unpopular, "the English love of fair play makes people consider they have been very shabbily treated."<sup>116</sup> Additionally, despite a not insignificant amount of pressure, Churchill had refused to make detailed explanations in the Commons and would only do so in a secret session on 10 December. The content of this statement was not available for public consumption. MPs had, in late November, tabled a motion criticising British association with Darlan as being contrary to the ideals of the war.<sup>117</sup> Lord Vansittart also submitted a paper for debate in the House of Lords. He hoped to address fears that the installation of Darlan as High Commissioner indicated a trend towards using other "Quislings" in the administration. The War Cabinet requested that Vansittart refrain from his questions, particularly in open

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<sup>113</sup> Diplomatic Correspondent, "General Attacks Darlan: de Gaulle's Position," *The Guardian*, 26 November 1942, 6.

<sup>114</sup> Home Intelligence Weekly Report, 3 December 1942, INF 1/292, TNA.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Home Intelligence Weekly Report, 10 December 1942, INF 1/292, TNA.

<sup>117</sup> "Anti-Darlan Motion: Undermining Faith," *The Guardian*, 26 November 1942, 5. "Admiral Darlan's Position: MPs Press for an Early Debate," *The Guardian*, 27 November 1942, 8.

session.<sup>118</sup> Although Churchill later wrote that his secret session address had completely removed parliamentary opposition, and had quenched “the hostile Press and reassured the country,” Home Intelligence Reports indicated otherwise.<sup>119</sup>

At this juncture, total German occupation made it impossible to maintain the fiction that metropolitan France remained sovereign and independent. Still, press reports from Vichy continued to attempt to construct just such a perception. Laval, in a radio address that was published extensively in the press, focussed upon criticising the American policy of aggression towards the French state, and insisted that an agreement with Germany was the only way to uphold peace in Europe.<sup>120</sup> Laval attempted to absolve the German violation of the armistice and occupation of the Southern zone. He argued that Anglo-American forces were to blame because they had infringed upon French sovereignty in North Africa and threatened German security. Laval’s argument that North Africa was a natural extension of the metropole itself was useful in depicting the operations as an act of war against the body of France.<sup>121</sup> Imagery of Pétain, who remained titular head of state after ceding leadership to Laval, was crucial in these depictions of the largely imaginary French state. In its final days, *Le Temps* printed and quoted from a number of telegrams that expressed loyalty to Pétain, and thus the French nation. The hero of Verdun embodied the fictional existence of the state.<sup>122</sup> Articles such as this became a regular feature in the last days of November. References to sovereignty as a justification and means to condemn Allied actions had, since June 1940, encapsulated a crucial part of Vichy’s source of perceived legitimacy. Following the German occupation, official statements, and therefore press sources, attempted to maintain such arguments, but with an increasing gap between rhetoric and reality.

What became more apparent in the days leading up to Darlan’s eventual assassination on 24 December was the extent to which the public response in

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<sup>118</sup> Conclusions of Meeting of the War Cabinet, 21 November 1942, PREM 3/442/10, TNA.

<sup>119</sup> Home Intelligence Weekly Reports, 17 December 1942, INF 1/292, TNA.

<sup>120</sup> “La France devant l’agression Anglo-Américaine,” *Le Temps*, 23 November 1942, 1.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> “Les messages de fidélité au chef de l’état,” *Le Temps*, 25 November 1942, 1.

Britain was influenced not only by a deep sense of right and wrong but by longer personal experience of involvement in the conflict. Examining contrasting press responses in Britain and the United States sheds light on this attitude. Press analyses carried out by the CNF's *Commissariat de Information* noted that although the American press described the event as only a temporary military necessity, British media sources continued to emphasise its moral and sentimental aspects.<sup>123</sup> Although Darlan featured prominently in American press sources, broadcasters largely justified the decision as a military one, ignoring political repercussions.<sup>124</sup> An article in *The Guardian* pointed out that while in Britain there are "no defenders of the past role of the Admiral...except a few cranks and a few sophists," there were plenty to be found in America.<sup>125</sup> Additionally, the same article criticised press censorship for suppressing the expression of Anglo-American disagreement on the matter. Additional analyses carried out by the Foreign Office confirmed that American opinion regarding Darlan had remained consistent throughout, "justifying the Allied policy of temporary recognition."<sup>126</sup> When examining British opinion, however, reports emphasised that few trusted Darlan. He was labelled as a traitor. Moreover, many assumed that he would turn against the Allies again if it suited him.<sup>127</sup> Importantly, this contrast was also mirrored in the strength of the political reactions within Britain, most notably in the Foreign Office and Parliament. Churchill's reluctance to debate the Darlan affair in open session had led to a general uncertainty surrounding the details of the agreement, and more importantly, its duration. Given information already discussed, it was clear that Darlan's tenure was uncertain, and was likely to be longer than the words "temporary expedient" suggested. The British media, which de Gaulle believed was consistent with broader public opinion, continued to demand clarification on

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<sup>123</sup> Telegramme, CNF de Commissariat Information, Presse, 21 November 1942, 18GMII/135, MAE.

<sup>124</sup> American Division Ministry of Information, "U.S. Press Commentary on Darlan," 17 November 1942, FO 371/32155, TNA.

<sup>125</sup> D.W. Brogan, "Anglo-American Relations: The Censorship and Darlan," *The Guardian*, 4 December 1942, 4.

<sup>126</sup> American Division Ministry of Information, 29 November 1942, FO 371/32143, TNA. Halifax to Foreign Office, 16 November 1942, FO 371/32139, TNA.

<sup>127</sup> Home Intelligence Weekly Reports, 17 December 1942, INF 1/292, TNA.

the Darlan affairs throughout December.<sup>128</sup> Darlan's position, and move to convene an Imperial Council caused further scepticism within the British press. He appeared to be consolidating his political position rather than serving purely to facilitate military operations.<sup>129</sup>

In light of Foreign Office, MOI, Parliamentary and press reports criticising Darlan's continued role in the Algiers administration, Churchill's 10 December Commons address in secret session appeared as almost an about face marking as it did a broad acceptance of the current state of affairs. His earlier assurances to de Gaulle that "you have been with us during the war's worst moments. We shall not abandon you now that the horizon shows signs of brightening," appeared to have been abandoned for this address.<sup>130</sup> While subtly shifting blame into the American camp by emphasising ownership of military and political control, Churchill also stepped back from de Gaulle. Churchill employed the principle of *droit administratif*, arguing that since in French culture obedience to authority was considered supreme, de Gaulle's actions and his person were understandably distasteful to those who had remained "loyal" following the collapse.<sup>131</sup> However, he went even further. Churchill claimed that while no promises had been made to Darlan, equally, de Gaulle did not "have a monopoly on the future of France."<sup>132</sup> Churchill used the same argument that Vichy employed, namely, obedience to authority, in order to explain the current situation. Likewise, he pointed to earlier disagreements with de Gaulle in Syria in order to muddy the ethical separation between him and Darlan. By pointing out that neither party had clean hands Churchill hoped to place the Darlan affair into a broader and more complex context, in which, neither leader was clearly ideal.

Darlan's assassination put an abrupt end to speculation surrounding his tenure as High Commissioner. However, lingering public distaste for the deal illustrated the strength of opinion that it had engendered. Ideas of moral

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<sup>128</sup> Telegramme, du Commissariat Information, Presse Britannique, 12 December 1942, 18GMII/135, MAE.

<sup>129</sup> Diplomatic Correspondent, "Darlan's Move: Digging Himself in," *The Guardian*, 3 December 1942, 5.

<sup>130</sup> Charles de Gaulle, *The Complete War Memoirs of Charles de Gaulle*, vol. 2, *Unity 1942-1944*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), 350

<sup>131</sup> Churchill, *Hinge of Fate*, 573.

<sup>132</sup> Secret Session Statement on North Africa, 10 December 1942, PREM 3/442/12, TNA.



behaviour resurfaced in the public response. Home Intelligence Reports recorded general relief at the news of Darlan's death coupled with the surfacing of much discussion over assassination as a means to get rid of someone. "People 'feel they ought not to approve of *assassinations*,' but the majority are inclined to make an exception in this case."<sup>133</sup> *The Guardian* wrote, "the assassination of Admiral Darlan opens a way out of one of the worst tangles of the war."<sup>134</sup> Indeed British press sources into 1943 continued to criticise American policy in France over the Darlan affair. This issue was raised in a War Cabinet distribution linked to concerns that broader Anglo-American relations could be damaged.<sup>135</sup> The strength of opinion surrounding Darlan remained so consistent that Churchill confided to Eden that he believed the military victory itself had been "tarnished and tainted."<sup>136</sup> He went on to add, "There is a deep loathing in this country, particularly strong among the working classes, against what are thought to be intrigues with Darlan and Vichy which are held to be contrary to the broad and simple loyalties which united the masses throughout the world against the common foe."<sup>137</sup> Darlan's death may have eliminated the controversy surrounding the duration of his rule, however, it did not eliminate the bitter taste of the willingness of Allied forces to work with someone who had been repeatedly discredited by past official rhetoric. That the issue resurfaced in relation to the moral conduct of the war illustrated that victory could not always serve to justify military actions.

## Conclusion

From the moment that planning for Torch commenced in earnest, the Anglo-American joint planning staff attached a great deal of importance to the manner in which events would be portrayed, and, as a result, to the ways in which Torch would be viewed by individuals and governments. Despite a shared belief that Vichy forces were relatively unlikely to resist an American invasion and the American contention that Giraud would make an ideal and uncontroversial leader in North Africa, such calculations were proven incorrect. Nevertheless,

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<sup>133</sup> Home Intelligence Weekly Reports, 31 December 1942, INF 1/292, TNA.

<sup>134</sup> Diplomatic Correspondent, "Chance to End Muddle: Allies Must Take Firm Line Giraud's Policy," *The Guardian*, 27 December 1942, 1.

<sup>135</sup> Halifax to Foreign Office, "War Cabinet Distribution," 1 January 1943, PREM 3/442/14, TNA.

<sup>136</sup> Churchill to Eden, 2 January 1943, PREM 3/442/14, TNA.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

the meticulous drafting and sequencing of press releases and communiqués demonstrated the lengths to which the Allies were willing to go in order to reassure all interested parties of their good intentions. Core justifications suggested that the invasions were mounted in order to forestall German occupation while simultaneously beginning the restoration of France to her rightful place in the civilised world. Such depictions instilled the operations with a great deal of early significance. Not only did American press releases deliberately choose to represent the events as satisfying Soviet demands for a second front, they also attempted to establish their significance within the broader context of the war. This was done well before victory in North Africa, and, more specifically, in Tunisia, was assured.

Although early responses to the operations were understandably enthusiastic on the Allied side (an enthusiasm at least partly attributable to the disappointments of the previous months and years), the deals concluded with Admiral Darlan led to mounting criticism within both metropolitan France and Britain. The U.S. public reacted more favourably, an indulgence also reflected in the greater willingness amongst American media sources to consider arguments of military expediency. This perhaps illustrated the vastly different wartime experiences of the two Allied partners rather than any deeper cleavage over a compromise deal with the Algiers authorities. While Darlan's actions were considered morally repugnant, and indeed were typecast as the epitome of treason on the British and Free French sides, the American press and public had little personal experience upon which to base such harsh judgements. Striving to balance the requirement of the Grand Alliance with the sterner views of domestic critics, the Churchill government chose to keep its rhetoric low-key, in marked contrast to the voluble condemnation of the Darlan deal in the numerous Gaullist publications that emanated from Carlton Gardens in the wake of Torch. This silence, in response to both press and parliamentary criticism, illustrated the difficulty of the situation and the extent to which Churchill's Ministers and senior officials were limited in what they could say by the overarching requirements of the Anglo-American relationship. Certainly, the reality of events on the ground, including the expectation that Darlan would retain nominal power, meant that following Roosevelt's 17 November press release, few other arguments could be advanced to exculpate British choices. That Churchill opted not to expand on the event in a Commons debate in open

session pointed to his acknowledgment of the strength of public opposition to the arrangements made with Darlan, as well as his underlying hope that time would damp down such criticisms.

Vichy likewise drew on well-worn ideas of violated honour in order to criticise aggression against its sovereign imperial territory. This moral outrage did not last. The German occupation of the Southern Zone in late November 1942 placed both Pétain and Laval in an increasingly invidious position as they attempted to justify even this move as only natural and indeed a defensive response to Allied “aggression.” The farcical nature of French sovereignty was increasingly projected onto the figure and image of Pétain, with the publication of fealty to what he represented as the *patrie*. The coming years would see the further disintegration of any meaningful Vichy sovereignty and a consequent shift in emphasis towards the damage done by a treacherous Anglo-Gaullist alliance, which, it was claimed, had helped bring France to its knees.

The moral tone that underpinned criticisms surrounding Torch remind us of an important point: in the eyes of domestic opinion within the major Allied nations military victory could not, as yet, be justified at any cost. De Gaulle capitalised on the ethical qualms expressed about the Darlan deal, and his office profited from the publication of strong statements that condemned Darlan without reserve, something that no Ministry in the British government was able to do. That de Gaulle was largely powerless in this situation made his rhetoric credible, not as a promise of action, but as a moral absolute, an ethical stance that chimed with public sentiment in Britain more broadly. Additionally, the sympathies of the British public, as the Foreign Office and MOI tracked them, were moulded by the belief that de Gaulle had been treated unfairly. His loyalty had been trampled on in favour of an inglorious, if expedient, marriage of convenience with Darlan’s followers in Algiers and Rabat. What was notable about the criticisms surrounding Darlan, whether they were propagated by the press or voiced by figures such as Eden, Cadogan or Vansittart, was that they all argued that a moral compromise of this calibre risked compromising – and indeed overriding - the material gains of a military victory. From June 1940, British rhetoric spanning official statements, Churchillian speeches and press interpretations, had all described the “men of Vichy” as venal defeatists: the antithesis of the war effort. Rehabilitating a member of this group into the Allied camp was virtually impossible from a moral point of view. The operation itself

could easily be described as a military victory. The fact that its very success was called into question by the Darlan agreements highlights the fact that the justification of any event consisted of more than simple definitions of success or failure. Rather, events were still judged and discussed on an ethical platform as much as a military one.

## Chapter 8: Under Pressure, The 1943 Lebanese Parliamentary Crisis

### Introduction

In a pair of articles published in 2007 and 2010 respectively, Meir Zamir argued that Free French leader Charles de Gaulle precipitated crises in the Levant as a means to demonstrate his own importance and signal disagreement over broader Allied war strategy.<sup>1</sup> However, Zamir's inclination to minimise the wider significance of events in this region, and indeed the Middle East as a whole, fails to acknowledge the vital importance of The Mediterranean and Middle East, both strategically and symbolically, in French and British foreign policy. From a strategic point of view, this area provided vital communication and shipping links as well as crucial reserves of oil. By 1940, the bifurcated pipeline that terminated in Haifa and Tripoli supplied enough oil to keep the entire Mediterranean fleet in service.<sup>2</sup> Egypt and the Suez Canal base zone was at the centre of Britain's Middle Eastern war effort, containing the largest concentration of British military resources, administrative support and security staff outside the British Isles.<sup>3</sup> However, the strategic side of the equation only explains half of the story. The ties linking France to the Levant were long-standing, complex, multi-dimensional, and preserved in ideas of historic rights and cultural connections. French links with Christian minorities had existed throughout the region since the first crusades between 1096 and 1099.<sup>4</sup> French interests in the eastern Mediterranean were gradually enshrined in cultural institutions such as mission schools, ostensible claims to protect the Christian minorities and trade links. By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, French refusal to relinquish control or influence over the Levant was deeply rooted. Specialised interest groups such as silk firms in Lyon, traders in Marseille and those with shares in French infrastructure projects were essentially united in their primary view of the

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<sup>1</sup> Meir Zamir, "De Gaulle and the Question of Syria and Lebanon during the Second World War: Part I," *Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 5 (2007): 675-708. Meir Zamir, "The 'Missing Dimension': Britain's Secret War Against France in Syria and Lebanon, 1942-1945: Part II," *Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 6 (2010): 791-900.

<sup>2</sup> James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle that Shaped the Middle East* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2011), 163.

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive list of Middle East operative bases and missions see: Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), Chapter 7, esp. 109-116.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce D Marshall, *The French Colonial Myth and Constitution-Making in the Fourth Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), 128.

Levant as a monetary asset. The French armed forces, on the other hand, represented another important vested interest that viewed access to Lebanese ports as vital to the preservation of France's Mediterranean power.<sup>5</sup> Still, as D.K. Fieldhouse, Aviel Roshwald and C.M. Andrew and A.S. Kanya-Forstner have convincingly argued, Syria and Lebanon's importance to France was closely linked to ideas of national prestige, power and the French civilising mission.<sup>6</sup> Bruce Marshall has argued likewise in regard to the rigidity of France's historic regional role, "With the lines of rivalry and policy so long established, there was a sort of fatalism surrounding both de Gaulle's policies and their ultimate failure."<sup>7</sup>

This chapter will consider the impact that traditional rivalries and relationships had on Gaullist policy. It will also examine the November 1943 parliamentary crisis in Lebanon as a precursor to French imperial withdrawal in 1945-1946. This crisis was precipitated by Jean Helleu, the man selected as Georges Catroux's replacement as Delegate General to the Levant. Helleu's decision, that November, to arrest the newly elected Lebanese Prime Minister, the President and several members of the Beirut Cabinet threw Anglo-Free French relations and the broader Arab world into turmoil. Anglo-Gaullist clashes in the Levant in 1943 showcase the complexity of the relationships that European powers held, not just with the Levant states, but also with the entire Arab world – itself the centre of a vibrant, multi-faceted public sphere in which British and French actions were the subject of constant, and often hostile scrutiny, whether in the press and other print media, in national parliaments, or in the politics of the Arab street. A study of the Levant, and of Anglo-French rivalry within this specific area must also include a discussion of how their regional interventions were interpreted and criticised throughout the Middle East. Put simply, the foreign policy that Britain conducted towards the Levant

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<sup>5</sup> D.K. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East: 1914-1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 239.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 252. Aviel Roshwald, *Estranged Bedfellows: Britain and France in the Middle East during the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 222. C.M. Andrew and A.S. Kanya-Forstner, *France Overseas: The Great War and the Climax of French Imperial Expansion* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1981), 302.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce D. Marshall, *The French Colonial Myth and Constitution-Making in the Fourth Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), 128.

had real repercussions for her standing in key states including Palestine, Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia.

During the Second World War, the British government sought to avoid renewed outbreaks of disorder within its Arab territories, aware that the costs of suppressing unrest would divert vital wartime resources. Wartime strategy then, was to “bolster the region’s friendly regimes.”<sup>8</sup> Between 1918 and 1939, Britain had faced costly uprisings in all of its newly acquired Mandates in addition to its Egyptian protectorate. In 1936, Britain sent 20,000 troops to Palestine to put down a revolt that dragged on for three years. The destruction that followed saw more than ten per cent of the male Palestinian Arab population killed, injured, exiled or interned.<sup>9</sup> To signal support for moderate pan-Arabist sentiment, and in an effort to placate nationalism more generally, the Foreign Office had in 1941 announced its support for the eventual formation of an Arab League. However, as the Iraqi revolts in 1941 and growing unrest in Palestine showed, unhappiness with British interference persisted.

Since late 1942 the Jewish Agency under the leadership of David Ben-Gurion had begun spending fifteen percent of its £1 million annual budget in training the Haganah, the Jewish defence organisation.<sup>10</sup> Revelations surrounding the extent of Nazi extermination efforts were already prompting increased Jewish militancy in Britain’s Palestinian mandate and heightened calls to open the borders to Jewish migrants, to the chagrin of the Arab population. An anti-British offshoot of the Haganah, which was established in the midst of the 1936-1939 Arab revolt, the Irgun Zvai Leumi had been organising attacks and sabotage operations against British targets since May 1939. Zionist terrorism represented the most violent expression of Jewish opposition to Britain’s restrictive immigration policy and its preference for the 7 July 1937 recommendations of the Peel Commission to partition Palestine.<sup>11</sup> Although the Irgun had suspended such attacks at the outbreak of war, another Zionist militant, Abraham Stern, responded by creating the Stern Gang from a dissenting faction of the Irgun. Its fighters continued to resist British policy, eventually carrying out the assassination of British Minister of State Lord Moyne in November 1944. The Irgun, under the new leadership of Polish-born

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<sup>8</sup> Jackson, *British Empire*, 97.

<sup>9</sup> Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs, A History* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 257.

<sup>10</sup> Barr, *A Line in the Sand*, 245.

<sup>11</sup> Jackson, *British Empire*, 140-141.

Menachem Begin also resumed operations in December 1943, compounding the worsening instability in the region. British Middle East policy necessarily had to consider how its stance towards the Levant and France's place there would impact upon its ability to control its own Middle East Empire effectively.

Central to this volatility and at the heart of the upcoming crisis in the Levant was the troubling question of independence: what did it mean and when would it be granted? More importantly, and what makes this analysis unique from previous strategic and diplomatic studies, was another pressing question: how would the process of independence negotiations affect the prestige and influence of Britain and France, both in the Levant and throughout the broader Arab world? Moreover, how could these European nations frame their policy in a way that would make their continued influence in the Middle East acceptable and even desirable? On the one hand, we know that France had proclaimed the independence of both Syria and Lebanon in July 1941. In practice, this pledge remained unfulfilled. Indeed, evolving Free French discussions of independence for Syria and Lebanon were increasingly tied to the assumption that lasting connections with France would remain enshrined in the form of binding treaty obligations. Such a treaty would grant France enduring economic, strategic and cultural rights over her former mandates.

Susan Pedersen addressed this difference between political and economic sovereignty in her brilliant study on the League of Nations Permanent Mandates Commission (LON PMC). Specifically, she points to the emergence of a "new definition of 'independence'" in the late 1920s, as the great powers relinquished claims of legal sovereignty, moving instead towards a form of economic sovereignty.<sup>12</sup> The precedent set in the Middle East by the Anglo-Iraqi treaties of 1922 and 1930 and the Anglo-Egyptian treaties of 1922 and 1936 entrenched the assumption that nominal independence need not preclude the mandate holder from retaining strategic and economic rights. This approach, which combined the cession of sovereign rights with the preservation of reserved rights for the Mandate holder, sought to pacify nationalist demands while allowing the guiding state to continue to enjoy an array of benefits including military bases and access to oil resources. From the French perspective, managing this transition, from formal to informal influence, was

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 260.



vital for a number of reasons. First, the combination of British military and fiscal superiority, French wartime failures and American anti-imperial rhetoric made the Free French intensely suspicious of both Anglo-Saxon intentions and local nationalist unrest. When examined purely from the viewpoint of military strength, de Gaulle simply did not have the resources to maintain unilateral control in the Levant. Second, the Levant, and particularly the Maronite Christian community, held a great deal of intangible, cultural value, and was equally esteemed by the competing Gaullists and Giraudists of the French Committee of National Liberation (CFLN), the proto-government which was officially formed in June 1943 and had its headquarters in Algiers. In practice, however, the mobilisation of culture as a political tool only weakened French influence further. Between 1941 and 1945, de Gaulle's policies combined insecurity over France's political position in its mandates with an unbending belief in French cultural superiority. Compromise became impossible. Jennifer Dueck examines the contradictions evident in French policy during this period, observing that "...culture and politics were interwoven in the tapestry of decolonisation in Syria and Lebanon."<sup>13</sup>

Maintaining an empire, or in this case supervising its demise, was made all the more complicated because this tangled web of strategic and cultural factors was closely linked to national prestige, both at home and abroad. Understanding this means looking beyond military manoeuvres. It acknowledges that no matter how callous and underhanded British policies may have been, they were still formulated with an eye towards maintaining local support and prestige, both in the Levant and in the broader Middle East. Thus, in many ways, adverse local reactions substantially limited Britain's practical options, the more so as the incipient crisis in Palestine intensified during 1943-44. In an attempt to stave off the question of independence in its own mandates, Britain sought to maintain what became a carefully constructed identity as an impartial and inherently benign arbiter. Current research rightly points out that Britain had to simultaneously protect the Middle East from Axis invasion without in the process alienating public, and overwhelmingly nationalist, opinion in the Arab World.<sup>14</sup> The following two chapters will examine

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<sup>13</sup> Jennifer M Dueck, *The Claims of Culture at Empire's End: Syria and Lebanon under French Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Jackson, *British Empire*, 100.

how rhetoric, or a lack of it, was an essential part of this strategy. However, first, it is important to understand the longer history of both Arab nationalism and Anglo-French relations in the Middle East. This history serves as a frame of reference in which Anglo-French policy can be understood, both in 1943 and later, at the close of the mandate period in 1945.

### **Shades of Independence and Historical Rivalry**

The question of independence for what is today Syria and Lebanon had been posed most recently, between the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the formalisation of the French mandate in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. Then, too, the French administration rapidly resorted to violence in response to populist nationalism. Still, the idea of a historically coherent and united nationalist movement against the French mandate should not be overstated. Nationalism was itself a relatively new phenomenon in the Arab world, gaining in popularity in the late nineteenth century in response to European imperialism and the attendant emergence of secular republicanism in late Ottoman Turkey.<sup>15</sup> Even then, Arab nationalist movements were not as firmly secular as those of European “modern” nationalism and the potential boundaries of what could or would constitute a particular nation state were as yet unclear. Lebanese nationalism between 1900 and 1940 developed around a particular geographic area. At the same time, another, broader form of Arab nationalism coalesced around cultural and ethnic values.<sup>16</sup> To complicate matters, the Arab world was itself a heterogeneous mix of religious and tribal identities.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, as D.K. Fieldhouse has suggested, one of the fundamental points of disagreement between Muslim and Christian notables in Lebanon were their respective attitudes towards France.<sup>18</sup> As a geographical entity, Lebanon was comprised

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<sup>15</sup> Rogan, *The Arabs*, 173.

<sup>16</sup> Albert Hourani, *The Emergence of the Modern Middle East* (London: The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1981), 186.

<sup>17</sup> Albert Hourani gives estimates of the different religious and ethnic populations residing in Syria and Lebanon based on census records from 1932 and 1943 in: Albert Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon: A Political Essay* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), 121.

<sup>18</sup> Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism*, 309. See also Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism*, 311 for a more in-depth categorisation of the political divisions between the inhabitants of Lebanon.

largely of intensely competitive tribal societies, a fact that hardly engendered a common sense of nationhood.<sup>19</sup>

Following the Druze massacres of over 10,000 members of the Christian population in 1860, western pressure forced the Ottomans to create the autonomous province, or *sanjaq*, of Mount Lebanon. However, the roughly 2,600 square miles of territory had neither port access nor arable land, making it reliant upon imported wheat and other food products.<sup>20</sup> Lebanon was unique amongst other holdings in the Ottoman Empire. The extensive powers of the elected twelve-member Administrative Council of Mount Lebanon and its membership divisions or system of concessions between Maronites, Druzes, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Shia and Sunni religious populations had a lasting impact on political thought and structures in Lebanon.

Eugene Rogan identifies three competing trends in interwar Lebanese politics.<sup>21</sup> First, by the close of the First World War, the Administrative Council, and specifically the Maronites and Greek Catholics agreed that their present territory should be expanded and then granted independence under French guidance. Knowing that France had traditionally looked favourably upon the idea of a "Greater Lebanon," which would encompass the seaport cities of Tripoli, Beirut, Sidon and Tyre and extend to the fertile Bekaa Valley in the East and the Anti-Lebanon Mountains in the west, the Administrative Council sought to use the mandate as a way to satisfy its own territorial ambitions and move towards *eventual* complete independence. However, many of the over 100,000 strong individuals making up the Lebanese émigré community argued strongly for independence, again under French tutelage, but within the geographical confines of an independent Syria. The third strand included Sunni Muslims and Greek Orthodox Christians in the province of Beirut, who wanted to avoid becoming minorities in an expanded Lebanese, Christian dominated state. This group opted to support Amir Faysal's Damascus-based government in the hopes of becoming part of a larger, Arab kingdom. There were also deep division within the Council itself. The Druze remained strongly opposed to a continued role for France in Lebanon while the Shii Mutawallis, who inhabited the southern region of Jabal Amil favoured a loose affiliation with Syria. These

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>21</sup> Rogan, *The Arabs*, 266-268.

differences of opinion illustrate the less than straightforward nature of the nationalist movements that continued to develop in Lebanon and Syria over the next 25 years.

Ultimately, both initial Lebanese and Syrian attempts to negotiate independence failed. In July 1920, seven members of the Administrative Council became concerned over the increasingly heavy-handed French politics of mandate rule. In a last-ditch attempt to avoid French occupation, they sought an agreement with Faysal to achieve immediate and *complete* independence. French high commissioner General Henri Gouraud responded by arresting these alleged traitors to the French cause.<sup>22</sup> In the weeks that followed, French troops delivered a series of crushing blows to Faysal's aspirations of statehood, culminating in the French siege of Damascus on 24 July, in which an estimated five thousand Arabs were killed.<sup>23</sup> Incorporating this historical background shows the depth of French ambition in the Levant and the extent to which local political movements were highly fragmented. The early willingness of two of the three strands of Lebanese political opinion to acquiesce to some kind of continued French presence in the region further illustrates the framework of thought in which early nationalist movements formulated their own policies.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, Anglo-French political manoeuvring within the Middle East also has a long history. Greater Syria, encompassing modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan, had been a recurrent source of Anglo-French rivalry since the early nineteenth Century. In 1841, communal fighting amongst the Muslim Druze and Christian Maronites, the two dominant groups residing in the Lebanese highlands of Mount Lebanon, was exacerbated by British support for the former and French support for the latter.<sup>25</sup> The much-vaunted 1904 *Entente Cordiale*, far from a simple mutual assistance pact, while resolving differences in Franco-British arguments in North Africa fomented others in the Middle East by facilitating European empire building in Western Asia. In

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 269-70.

<sup>23</sup> Marshall, *French Colonial Myth*, 129.

<sup>24</sup> This framework was not unique to the Levant. Frederick Cooper likewise examines how both French and African leadership were advocates of the post-war French federation movement as a path towards manageable regional development. Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa 1945-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Rogan, *The Arabs*, 115.

addition, this agreement removed all time constraints on the British occupation of Egypt and in turn acknowledged French “rights” in Morocco. Imperial bargaining of Arab futures became the norm. The period leading up to and immediately following the conclusion of the First World War was packed with intrigue. The Sykes Picot agreement, concluded in October 1916, originally gave Britain the Ottoman provinces of Baghdad and Basra, the French the Syrian coastal region and Cilicia and envisaged Palestine under international guidance.<sup>26</sup> Still, despite regional agreements such as these, Anglo-French relations in the Middle East were more often fraught with tension. Ignoring the August 1919 findings of the King-Crane Commission, which recommended the creation of a single Syrian State under a constitutional monarchy led by Amir Faysal, Britain and France carved out the territorial boundaries that remained in place when global war broke out again twenty years later.

The unrest in the Middle East that punctuated the interwar period likewise contributed to the hardening of nationalist sentiment directed against the mandate regimes. This in turn informed a recognisable pattern of responses in British and French mandate policy. Within the PMC, Palestine/Transjordan and Syria/Lebanon were the most discussed of any of the mandates, taking up 17.3% and 14.3% of the PMC’s thirty-seven sessions respectively.<sup>27</sup> After the June 1940 assassination of Syrian Nationalist and People’s Party leader, Dr Abd al-Rahman Shahbender, his deputy, Shukri al-Quwatli rose to power as the leader of the National Bloc, which had been formally established in 1931.<sup>28</sup> This was the largest, most widely supported group that fought for Syrian independence during the French mandate period. Future president of Lebanon Bishara al-Khoury founded the mirror image, Constitutional Bloc in 1936, which likewise advocated for the dissolution of the Mandate and its replacement with a Franco-Lebanese treaty. The National Bloc, whose leadership consisted largely of wealthy urban notables, lost a great deal of credibility after its failure to conclude a binding treaty with France and prevent the cession of Syrian Alexandretta to Turkey in 1939. At the time of the Exporter invasions in June 1941, it had become opportunistically pro-Axis in the hope of securing Berlin’s

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<sup>26</sup> The history of this period has been well documented and will not be discussed in significant detail here.

<sup>27</sup> Pedersen, *Guardians*, 68.

<sup>28</sup> Dueck, *The Claims of Culture*, 17.

backing for immediate independence.<sup>29</sup> And, by 1943 it had revived itself as the Nationalist Party.<sup>30</sup> The British decision in early 1942 to begin dealings with al-Quwatli led to the choice later that year to press for his return to Syria (following his self-imposed exile to Baghdad). This conciliatory gesture flew in the face of French wishes.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, by 1941, when Anglo-French forces occupied the Levant, tensions were developing along the predictable lines of nationalist demands for independence. However, Free French military subservience to the British in Syria and Lebanon, and the Middle East as a whole further complicated the politics of independence negotiations. The Middle East War Council (MEWC), which was comprised of leading British (and, from May 1942, American) officials in the region, and chaired by Minister of State Richard Casey following his arrival in Cairo on 5 May, believed that the expulsion of the French from the Levant was desirable.<sup>32</sup> However, there was still a high level of indecision both within Whitehall and inside Churchill's Cabinet. Churchill himself remained firmly opposed to any efforts to oust the French from the Levant in favour of British leadership.

What became the public face of British policy was in fact influenced by a plethora of factors including the looming shift from wartime operational expediency to post war planning. The emergence of the U.S. and Soviet Union as "the big two" marked a significant change in the balance of global power. Indeed, the crisis in Lebanon could hardly have happened at a worse time, unfolding on the eve of Churchill's meeting with Roosevelt in Cairo between 22 and 26 November 1943 and the Teheran Conference of 28 November to 1 December. American Secretary of State Cordell Hull was at the time considering publically denouncing de Gaulle over Lebanon. Roosevelt's prior dislike of de Gaulle was likewise strengthened, confirming his decision that the Gaullist movement did not deserve formal Allied recognition as the legitimate French government.<sup>33</sup> For Britain, the strength of American power was

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<sup>29</sup> Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920-1945* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1987), 587.

<sup>30</sup> Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism*, 276.

<sup>31</sup> Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 597.

<sup>32</sup> "Resolutions of the Middle East War Council on the Political Situation the Middle East," 17 June 1943, CAB 66/37/47, The National Archives, [Henceforward TNA].

<sup>33</sup> Marshall, *French Colonial Myth*, 132.

undeniable. It was true that being able to consolidate regional supremacy in the Middle East after the conflict hinged upon the British ability to placate demands for reform or withdrawal from Palestine, Egypt and Iraq. However, without, at the very least, American acquiescence in these endeavours, Britain had little chance of success.

With their own expectations of exit from empire very much in mind, the governments and populations of the Arab States were also severely critical of French intransigence in Lebanon. Britain was well aware that their response to the Lebanon crisis was being closely watched throughout the region. It was this interconnectedness that made Middle Eastern politics so complex and placed constraints upon British policy. Since the outbreak of War in 1939, British governance in Palestine was largely consistent with the pro-Arab tradition of the Foreign Office Middle East Department, which countermanded the residual Zionist sympathies among certain Colonial Office personnel. However, by 1943 there was a strong consensus amongst the Jewish community in Palestine, known as the Yishuv, that the only acceptable post-war solution was total independence, even if this meant an outright conflict with the British.<sup>34</sup> Arab Palestinians, and indeed the broader Arab world, were resolutely opposed to the formation of a Jewish homeland in that region. As the primary land route for vital oil flowing from Iran to Haifa, and part of the overland communications link to India, both Palestine and Iraq were of great strategic importance to the British war effort. The Iraqi Kirkuk oilfields produced an annual four million tons of crude oil.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, Egyptian aspirations as a regional leader could not be ignored. British foreign policy between 1943-45 encouraged Egyptian leadership in the Arab world under the assumption that Cairo's continued influence would limit Palestinian weight in any regional league. This, it was hoped, would allow Britain to avoid demands for the implementation of an exclusively Arab state.<sup>36</sup>

Additionally, the undeniably crucial role that Egypt played as the lynchpin of the British war effort in the Middle East meant that it was vital to remain (as

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<sup>34</sup> Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism*, 186.

<sup>35</sup> Jackson, *British Empire*, 162.

<sup>36</sup> Michael T. Thornhill, "Britain and the Politics of the Arab League," in *Demise of the British Empire in the Middle East: Britain's Responses to Nationalist Movements, 1943-55*, eds. Martin Kolinsky and Michael J. Cohen (Frank Cass: London, 1998), 42.

much as possible) on good terms with King Farouk's government. British Ambassador in Cairo Miles Lampson had successfully pressured Farouk into dismissing his pro-German Prime Minister, Ali Mahir in 1940. However, nationalist rumblings from the likes of future presidents Gamal Abdul Nasser and his fellow army officer Anwar Sadat were symptomatic of a broader desire to rid the country of their British occupiers.<sup>37</sup> Worryingly, these sentiments were too often coupled with support for the Axis powers. In February 1942, after the resignation of Egyptian Prime Minister Husayn Sirry, Lampson demanded that Farouk appoint Wafdist leader Mustafa el-Nahhas Pasha. In a strange twist of fate, the national Wafd party was the only Egyptian political faction that was still credibly antifascist. Lampson responded firmly, ordering that Farouk's Abdin Palace be surrounded with British troops and armoured vehicles. However, this show of imperial strength did nothing to endear the British to the Egyptian political elite in the long term.

By the time of the Lebanese parliamentary crisis, British policy in the Levant combined the long-term intention to conserve regional influence with the short-term desire to avoid jeopardising the public image of the Anglo-Gaullist partnership. This attempt to balance two fundamentally opposing viewpoints was echoed in the official history of British foreign policy during the Second World War. Sir Llewellyn Woodward avoided placing blame, arguing instead that the British view was that, although the French should not have taken such "high-handed measures" in November 1943, the Lebanese were equally rash in unilaterally revoking French privileges.<sup>38</sup> These dual goals resulted in often-contradictory British policy initiatives emanating from within the Middle East and London. Specifically, officials working on the spot like Spears and Casey would actively work with local nationalists, advising them to refrain from violent retaliation as a way to build international sympathy for their claims. However, in London, British Foreign Office officials hoped to retain a neutral stance. They knew that backing the French would jeopardise Anglo-Arab relations while forcing the French to back down would further undermine any residual Anglo-French cooperation. The CFLN, itself increasingly recognizable as a fully-fledged government-in-waiting, was intent on consolidating continued French

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<sup>37</sup> Jackson, *British Empire*, 118.

<sup>38</sup> Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1962), 261.



influence in the Levant. But the CFLN's lack of resources meant that Fighting French administrators were compelled to rely upon vastly superior British manpower to maintain a viable bureaucracy in Syria and Lebanon. Meanwhile, the local governments and national parliaments of both Levant states were by this time in complete agreement about working towards separate and complete independence without any sort of compromise with the French.<sup>39</sup>

In the case of the CFLN and then de Gaulle's provisional government, the means to realise continued influence would follow a not unexpected path. French policy in 1943 (and again in 1945) would illustrate the extent to which a policy based on repression and colonial violence was central to the established practices of French imperial power. This remained the case even as policy makers debated a more liberal framework. The use and justification of violence as a demonstration of power assumed that the traditional repressive reaction to local revolts remained defensible. Indeed, these actions, and their justification under the guise of French cultural and political superiority bore striking similarities with the suppressions of the 1925 Druze revolts.<sup>40</sup> Although in 1943 the French sought to negotiate agreements that would allow them to maintain military bases and cultural institutions rather than indefinite mandate rule, the sentiment behind such intentions was similar. The perpetuation of an historic paternalistic attitude towards the indigenous population continued to inform French rhetoric. However, this time, as Bruce Marshall points out, France and Britain were not military equals and "the other interested parties were far more influential."<sup>41</sup> Given France's lack of military capabilities and the refusal of the American and Soviet governments to uphold French claims, as the League of Nations had done, France was crippled.

The restoration of France as a great power necessitated national unity alongside the renegotiation and strengthening of colonial ties. However, in 1943 the German defeat was still a remote prospect and neither the CFLN nor certainly Vichy could claim uncontested control over a French nation or empire.

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<sup>39</sup> Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 614.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and State Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 69. For more on the ideas and expectations underlying French Imperialism see: Martin Thomas, Bob Moore and L.J. Butler, *Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe's Imperial States, 1918-1975* (London: Hodder Education, 2008), Chapter 5.

<sup>41</sup> Marshall, *French Colonial Myth*, 132.

Syria and Lebanon may not have been part of France's formal empire, however, the administrative rights bestowed on it through the mandate fostered a similar sense of ownership, making empire a useful and relevant framework of interpretation. Article 22 of the LON Covenant charged France, an "advanced nation," with the administration and development of the Levant. However it provided no further details as to how long this obligation was to continue, nor how the transition to independence was to be made. Whatever the final outcome, de Gaulle and the CFLN were adamant that France would negotiate the future of these states, and that this future would include a place for France.

This section has examined the often-tumultuous history of the Middle East, as it emerged from four centuries of Ottoman rule and into European domination. As a relatively new concept, Arab Nationalism was still in its early stages when war broke out in 1939, and traditional divisions between religious and tribal communities rendered a coherent approach towards independence commensurately difficult. The following section will build upon this historical background, looking specifically at the Lebanese parliamentary crisis in November 1943. It will examine how British and French efforts to uphold their influence in the Middle East were impacted by local sentiments and material capabilities. In doing so, it will illustrate the extent to which official rhetoric was guided or limited by both traditional understandings of empire and the growing strength of nationalist demands.

### **Hopes of Empire and the Tide of Nationalism: Lebanon 1943**

In December 1942 the French National Committee (CNF)<sup>42</sup> finally agreed to hold national elections in Lebanon. The elections, organised from Beirut in late August 1943, resulted in nationalist victories, an outcome that de Gaulle blamed on British interference.<sup>43</sup> Al-Khoury (former adviser to General Gouraud) became the new president alongside Sorbonne-educated Riad al-Solh as Prime Minister. The new government abolished the French Mandate on 8 November and made Arabic the sole national language. Local French officials, under the orders of French Delegate General Helleu, responded swiftly. Early on 11

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<sup>42</sup> On 24 September 1941 the Comité National Français replaced the Conseil de Défense de l'Empire Français. The latter was originally founded as a central organisational committee to look after territories that had rallied to de Gaulle.

<sup>43</sup> Charles de Gaulle, *The Complete War Memoirs*, vol. 2, *Unity 1942-1944*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Simon & Schuster, 1959), 524.

November Helleu arrested the president, prime minister, three ministers and one deputy. They were interned in a fortress in the southern town of Rashaya. He appointed Émile Eddé, the pro-French candidate, as the provisional president. Helleu's actions were unreservedly criticised within the British War Cabinet, not least because the members regarded Eddé as "a notorious drug trafficker."<sup>44</sup>

Violence erupted in the streets of Beirut in response to the subsequent dissolution of the Lebanese Chamber of Deputies. Meanwhile, Helleu tried to contain the crisis, ordering the seizure of all printing presses in the Levant as a way to suppress publication of the controversy.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, Spears was quickly becoming a vocal proponent of Levantine independence. On 24 November, the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Hayat* published an extensive article praising Spears' role in the movement towards independence. In the interview, Spears took a decisive stance on the side of the nationalists, an attitude that would become a source of untold frustration in London. Moreover, he told his interviewer that the first thing he did after president al-Khoury's son informed him of the arrests was to publicise them. He sent a messenger to Palestine to broadcast Helleu's actions in English and Arabic. He also coordinated transport for journalists between Beirut and Cairo.<sup>46</sup> Responses on both the French and British sides illustrate how important it was to control press reactions within the immediate region. The responses of local and regional groups, the CFLN and British official sources will illustrate how each side sought to carve a space for themselves within the Arab world and how rhetoric played a crucial role in these endeavours.

Britain's extremely delicate position in the Middle East was apparent in the contrast between the reserve that characterised the British official response and the more virulent condemnation of French actions within the mass media both at home and throughout the Middle East. Official reluctance to take sides in the debacle indicated how closely British prestige throughout the Middle East was tied to their response within the Levant. Moreover, unlike previously discussed operations, the crises in 1943 and 1945 forced the British to *react* to

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<sup>44</sup> W.M. (43) 153<sup>rd</sup> Conclusions, 12 November 1943, CAB 65/36/21, TNA.

<sup>45</sup> Spears Interview, 11 March 1948, GB165-0269, Middle East Centre Archives, [Henceforward MECA].

<sup>46</sup> Edward Spears, interview in "Al-Hayat", 24 November 1943, GB165-0269, Box 3, MECA.

events as they unfolded, leaving them little time to formulate a strategic rhetorical strategy. This fact is crucial, because it situates the crisis as an impediment to British policy, when previous operations were undertaken to further their interests. Specifically, the *silence* of British officials, or the lack of detailed information from traditional sources like the Foreign Office, was a deliberate response. Overt support for the nationalists would call into question British rights in her own mandates as well as the status of treaties with Iraq and Egypt, which both nations were eager to exchange for unhindered independence. Equally, it would cause irreparable damage with the CFLN. On the other hand, backing Helleu's heavy-handed efforts to force the nationalists to come to terms with the French presence would jeopardise British credibility and therefore the likelihood that they would be able to either conclude useful treaties with any of these nations or effectively quell unrest in Palestine.

The situation was further complicated by the early stages of post-war planning. After Giraud's resignation as co-leader of the CFLN on 8 November 1943, de Gaulle had quickly consolidated his personal power as premier and, effectively, president-in-waiting of the French provisional government expected to emerge from the CFLN. While in Algiers, he remained reluctant to compromise the political future of his movement and avoided committing to precise political plans for the post-war reconstruction of France.<sup>47</sup> However, from mid-1942 the CFLN had begun to consider possible routes to a post-liberation administration. Despite potential challenges from internal resistance groups, the organisation remained better placed to contribute such plans. It had both physical security and the organisational framework of a governmental structure. In October 1942, de Gaulle created the *Commission du Débarquement*, a committee to supervise decisions on the administration of France during the liberation.

Andrew Shennan has identified two core components of Free French ideology, each of which was closely tied to the Gaullist conceptualization of post-war reconstruction: patriotism and imperial unity.<sup>48</sup> De Gaulle made it very clear in his memoirs that it was of primary importance for France to regain her rightful place as one of the world powers. She could do this as a result of her

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<sup>47</sup> Andrew Shennan, *Rethinking France: Plans for Renewal, 1940-1946* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1989), 56.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

historical prestige and remaining overseas territories.<sup>49</sup> Crucial to this restoration of French sovereignty was the ability to formulate, to implement and to legitimise policy both at home and abroad. In 1943, French justifications of the parliamentary arrests were committed to the legitimisation of the French position in the Levant. Aimed at consolidating international, and particularly American support for the French role, such rhetoric construed the Lebanese as rash and immature. At the same time, it raised the spectre of independence, with the understanding that this could only be granted by French authority. The official statements that supported this policy were accompanied by a well-worn discourse of indigenous inexperience and the assumption that independence meant different things for “modern” and “pre-modern” states.

French communiqués sought to frame Helleu’s actions within an essentially moral, humanitarian and legalistic framework. Gaullist statements, which claimed the right and responsibility to uphold the mandate, were consistent with interwar constructions that viewed colonial culture and indigenous inabilities to rule as justifications for French tutelage.<sup>50</sup> From the inception of the crisis, communiqués issued by Henri Bonnet, de Gaulle’s Commissioner for Information, underscored the legal grounds of French actions and the inherent bad faith of the Lebanese government. Al-Khoury, Bonnet argued, presented the French with a “fait accompli.” Helleu had been sent to begin negotiations for independence, and it was only the blind and inherently *irrational* nationalism of the Lebanese cabinet that resulted in the attempt to take by force what they were on the cusp of receiving “de bon gré.”<sup>51</sup> On 16 November de Gaulle addressed the Provisional Consultative Assembly to reiterate the appropriateness of French actions. The mandate, he stressed, was an international statute that neither the governed population nor the governing party had the authority to renounce.<sup>52</sup> The French position as “puissance mandataire” was obligatory, not voluntary.<sup>53</sup> Going further, the French press in Algiers argued that the Lebanese press expressed approval of the attitude of

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<sup>49</sup> Charles de Gaulle, *The Complete War Memoirs of Charles de Gaulle*, vol. 3, *Salvation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 873.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas, *Crises of Empire*, 127.

<sup>51</sup> René Richard, “Reflets du jour – la France au Liban,” *L’Echo d’Alger*, 14 November 1943, 1.

<sup>52</sup> Charles de Gaulle, *Discours et Messages Pendant la Guerre Juin 1940-Janvier 1946* (Paris: Plon, 1970), 344-347.

<sup>53</sup> “Les Événements du Liban,” *L’Echo d’Alger*, 13 November 1943, 1.

French authorities in rightfully seeking to preserve strong ties with the French nation.<sup>54</sup> This was largely a result of Helleu's 14 November statement broadcast via Radio Levant claiming that he had received countless messages of thanks for the actions he had taken.<sup>55</sup>

The invocation of the French Delegation General as a responsible authority bound by France's status as a mandatory power signified an attempt to create a framework in which French actions were driven, not by any unwarranted desire for continued influence, but by a solemn legal obligation. Within this context, Helleu's actions were "perfectly justifiable" and indeed, consistent with French obligations.<sup>56</sup> Catroux's arrival in Beirut to resolve the crisis provided further opportunities for the CFLN to demonstrate good faith as a protector and guide. France would bestow on "cette jeune nation, en marche vers sa complète indépendance, une nouvelle marque de son affectueuse sollicitude."<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, Casey warned Catroux, "public opinion in the world and particularly in Lebanon would be unimpressed by legal niceties." They, and the rest of the world would only remember that France had promised independence and at the first opportunity reneged on these promises.<sup>58</sup> Catroux's original plan to win France "moral credit" in the eyes of the Levant through a seemingly liberal approach towards independence faltered under this sustained pressure.<sup>59</sup>

In the British camp, responding to the arrests meant acknowledging a range of violent criticism without too overtly taking the side of the nationalists. The British press had been printing prominent stories about rising tensions in Lebanon from 10 November, the day prior to the arrests.<sup>60</sup> Subsequent reports contained news of violence, demonstrations and strikes, which Bonnet countered. He maintained that not only were such stories hugely exaggerated,

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> British Legation Beirut to Foreign Office, 15 November 1943, GB165-0269, Box 3, MECA.

<sup>56</sup> De Gaulle, *Unity*, 526.

<sup>57</sup> "Reflets du jour – La France au Liban," *L'Echo d'Alger*, 14 November 1943, 1.

<sup>58</sup> Minister Cairo to Foreign Office, 16 November 1943, GB165-0269, Box 3, MECA.

<sup>59</sup> Ahmed M. Gomaa, *The Foundation of the League of Arab States: Wartime Diplomacy and Inter-Arab Politics, 1941-1945* (London: Longman, 1977), 91.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

a state of calm existed throughout the region.<sup>61</sup> British media responses were, unsurprisingly, the cause of friction between the CFLN and London. Foreign Office official R.M. Makins, who was assisting Resident Minister in Algiers Harold MacMillan, reported to London that Commissioner for Foreign Affairs René Massigli had requested that press and wireless sources be restrained from exaggerating the level of unrest outside of Beirut.<sup>62</sup>

In London, the desire to avoid regional unrest throughout the Middle East triggered a more ambivalent response that neither condemned French actions nor invalidated nationalist claims. At the same time, the seriousness of the situation left the Foreign Office in no doubt that the French must be privately forced to comply with British demands. Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden's initial telegram to Macmillan instructed him to make it clear to the French that their actions were "wholly indefensible." The note went on to threaten that if British demands for the recall of Helleu and the release of the ministers were not met, "we should be compelled to take a line which would certainly imply dissociating ourselves completely from the French, and might entail consequences which would be most unpleasing to them."<sup>63</sup> This threat implied a public disavowal of French actions in the Levant followed by their forcible reversal. The War Cabinet, however, took a stand from early on against the use of armed intervention except as a last resort. Their preference was instead to threaten to revoke Britain's *de jure* recognition of the CFLN. Threatening to withdraw recognition from de Gaulle's Algiers institution relied upon rhetorical pressure as a legitimate means of intervention and a diplomatic means to resolve the crisis. Ultimately, the Foreign Office view, which favoured the threat of martial law *combined with* a subtle distancing from French actions became the foundation for the British ultimatum.<sup>64</sup>

From a material perspective, Britain, and more specifically Middle East Command (MEC), easily had the resources to supplant French forces in the Levant. De Gaulle routinely complained that while Britain had hundreds of thousands of troops in the Middle East, French forces amounted to only three

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<sup>61</sup> Rédacteur diplomatique d'A.F.I., "Le Calme le plus absolu règne dans tout le Liban," *L'Echo d'Alger*, 18 November 1943, 1.

<sup>62</sup> Mr. Makins to Foreign Office, 13 November 1943, GB165-0269, Box 3, MECA.

<sup>63</sup> W.M. (43) 153<sup>rd</sup> Conclusions, 12 November 1943, CAB 65/36/21, TNA.

<sup>64</sup> W.M. (43) 154<sup>th</sup> Conclusions, 15 November 1943, CAB 65/36/22, TNA.

Senegalese battalions and the 18,000 local volunteers who made up the *Troupes Speciales*.<sup>65</sup> The 70,000 strong *Armée du Levant*, traditionally made up of a majority of Senegalese, Madagascan and North African regular troops, had been disbanded after the Exporter operations in 1941.<sup>66</sup> British Foreign Office documents demonstrate that Arab attitudes, not just in the Levant, but also throughout the Middle East, outranked the demands of the metropolitan press and home sentiment. However, there were still differences of opinion over how to achieve Arab support and at what cost. While Spears and Casey prioritised finding a solution that would bolster Arab opinion towards Britain even at the expense of de Gaulle, in Algiers, Macmillan was reluctant to compromise Anglo-French relations.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, the most significant question on the table was: when it came to independence, would the British stand by their wartime promises?<sup>68</sup> This combination of growing pan-Arabism (even if traditional rivalries lingered<sup>69</sup>) and French sensibilities led the Foreign Office to encourage depictions of Britain as a disinterested but helpful negotiator. Just as de Gaulle hoped to preserve French influence in the Levant, so too broad British policy sought to preserve the British presence in strategic zones of interest. Following the Lebanese parliamentary crisis, this meant contending with a swathe of anti-French responses from governments across the Middle East.

Writing from Cairo, British diplomat Terence Shone expressed his concern over Egyptian reactions. The Egyptian press, he argued, was unabashedly on the side of the Lebanese. Egyptian publications were mobilising the democratic principles expressed in the Atlantic Charter<sup>70</sup> as proof of the indefensibility of French actions. The daily Wafdist newspaper *Al Misri*, followed the 8 November pronouncements closely, calling upon the French Committee to recognise the death of imperial regimes and the incompatibility of

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<sup>65</sup> De Gaulle, *Unity*, 525.

<sup>66</sup> Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism*, 275.

<sup>67</sup> "Directive on the Statement by the British Government on the Declaration of Martial Law in the Lebanon," 20 November 1943, FO 898/197, TNA.

<sup>68</sup> Wm. Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945-1951: Arab Nationalism, The United States, and Postwar Imperialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 124.

<sup>69</sup> Broader Arab apprehensions of Hashemite ambitions had led to Syria siding with Egypt and Saudi Arabia against Transjordan and Iraq.

<sup>70</sup> The Atlantic Charter was a joint statement made by Churchill and Roosevelt on 14 August of 1941. Among other things, it promised "the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live."



Allied principles with the domination of a large nation over a small one.<sup>71</sup> If Britain chose to step in on the side of the French, this “would be extremely awkward,” Shone continued.<sup>72</sup> Saudi monarch Ibn Saud also cited the democratic themes of the charter in his telegram to Churchill. He invoked a highly cultural image of the British, which drew on ideas of fair play and historic commitment to champion the cause of the underdog.<sup>73</sup> The Iraqi response was no less scathing. On 13 November the Chamber argued that continued British support for and backing of the CFLN facilitated their continued presence in the Levant. A few members even called French troops “British mercenaries.”<sup>74</sup> The following day, British ambassador in Baghdad Sir Kinahan Cornwallis reported that the Iraqi press was united in their condemnation of French actions in Lebanon. Citing a number of examples, Cornwallis stressed that the mass media was inciting Arab nationalist militancy.<sup>75</sup>

In the midst of this strong response, it is easy to recognise the reluctance within the British government to risk publically taking sides. An official communiqué published on 13 November confirmed prior promises of independence but lacked any real commitment as to how and when this would be achieved.<sup>76</sup> In the Commons, Undersecretary of State Richard Law described the arrests as causing “great public excitement” in Lebanon and the broader Middle East. He explained that this was due to the perception that they “were regarded as unjustified by the circumstances.”<sup>77</sup> Notably, this statement neither passed judgment on the arrests nor portrayed Britain as being on the same side as the Lebanese nationalists. It only described the response within Lebanon. Instead, Law reaffirmed British commitments to the 1941 promises of independence and the importance of Lebanon to the on-going war effort, still without committing to a particular course of action. Official communications

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<sup>71</sup> *Al Misri*, 8 November 1943, 4GMII/29, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, [Henceforward MAE].

<sup>72</sup> Shone to Foreign Office, 10 November 1943, GB165-0269, MECA.

<sup>73</sup> H.M. Minister, Jedda to H.M. Minister, Beirut, 13 November 1943, MECA.

<sup>74</sup> H.M. Ambassador, Baghdad to H.M. Minister Beirut, 13 November 1943, MECA.

<sup>75</sup> H.M. Ambassador, Baghdad to Foreign Office, 14 November 1943, MECA.

<sup>76</sup> Diplomatic Correspondent, “Britain not Consulted,” *The Guardian*, 13 November 1943, 5. Diplomatic Correspondent, “British Approach to French,” *The Times*, 13 November 1943, 4.

<sup>77</sup> *Hansard* HC Deb vol. 393 col. 1450 (23 November 1943)

<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1943/nov/23/lebanon-situation>.

throughout the crisis remained vague. They reverted to broad promises rather than endorsing a specific strategy. BBC Europe's broadcasting instructions stressed the need to impart the "moral, political and strategic" position of Britain, an approach, which again credited the British as a kind of helpful diplomatic presence in the current affair within the broader confines of the war.<sup>78</sup>

However, as the crisis escalated, it became increasingly difficult to maintain this position of neutrality. Alarmed by reports of worsening unrest, the Foreign Office began to prepare an ultimatum, which would be given to Catroux, with the goal of forcing him to release the internees. There was a strong possibility that the ultimatum would become public should Catroux refuse. This recognition meant that an intrinsic part of the ultimatum included considering how British prestige could be protected against criticism both from nationalist quarters in the Middle East and Metropolitan France. On 19 November Casey delivered what he subtly called an "aide-mémoire" to Catroux. It demanded that the internees be released by 10.00 on 22 November or Britain would declare martial law and free the arrested officials.<sup>79</sup> Although de Gaulle later argued that Catroux had already taken steps to liberate the ministers on his own, and the British did not in fact intervene militarily, the debates that surrounded the ultimatum remain instructive.<sup>80</sup> Specifically, British Foreign Office reports stressed the need to prepare appropriate responses justifying British actions, should intervention become necessary. Decision makers in this office and the War Cabinet were fearful that too strong of a British response would reflect badly upon a French audience. Moreover, it would provide an opportunity to showcase Allied disunity through British exploitations of the French.

Intervening on the side of the nationalists might also compromise British standing in the Middle East. A Foreign Office directive noted that British intervention and the blatant championing of the nationalist cause could provide an opportunity to question "British hypocrisy in posing as the champion of

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<sup>78</sup> Telegram 1280-1282, Vienot à Diplofrance, 18 November 1943, 3AG 1/137, Archives Nationales, [Henceforward AN].

<sup>79</sup> Eden subsequently extended the time limit by 48 hours, making the new deadline 10am 24 November. W.M. (43) 159<sup>th</sup> Conclusions, 21 November 1943, CAB 65/36/27, TNA.

<sup>80</sup> De Gaulle, *Unity*, 527.

oppressed native populations in view of India, Palestine, etc.”<sup>81</sup> On 19 November, the Foreign Office, after consultation with Minister of Information Brendan Bracken, wrote to Casey explaining how to “prepare public opinion” in the event that Britain declared martial law. Press correspondents “should emphasise [the] gravity of [the] local situation, the rising anxiety in neighbouring countries and danger of letting the situation remain as it is...”<sup>82</sup> Further directives stipulating how the crisis should be discussed publically emphasised the legitimacy of British actions by connecting them to American and Soviet policies. In the case that the French refused the ultimatum and Britain declared martial law, one document stated that it should be made clear that British action was only taken after consultation with the U.S. and the Soviet Union when attempts to compromise had failed.<sup>83</sup> Interestingly, the Free French also attempted to emphasise Soviet support as a way to underline the internationally recognised right to conclude strategic treaties. Spears wrote to the Foreign Office to report that a poster depicting de Gaulle and Stalin side by side had been posted all over Beirut on 10 November. This was a consistent part of French propaganda, Spears argued, which implied Soviet backing for French actions in the Levant.<sup>84</sup> Although the Soviets did not issue a single statement during the Lebanon crisis, they and the United States became increasingly involved in the Levant in the following years.<sup>85</sup> These directives illustrate how the British response was constrained as a result of pressure from both French and Middle East nationalist groups. Maintaining the perception of French agency in the issue allowed Britain to focus her policy through rhetoric rather than overt military action. However, it also fostered the French belief that an agreement with the Levant states was still possible.

Media reports, particularly within Britain, complicated official neutrality as news stories spread beyond British shores. Nationalist audiences within Lebanon also read and interpreted stories from the British press. Writing to the Foreign Office, Spears reported that the opinions in these articles were

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<sup>81</sup> “Directive on the Statement by the British Government,” 20 November 1943, FO 898/197, TNA.

<sup>82</sup> Foreign Office to British Legation Beirut, 19 November 1943 GB165-0269, Box 3, MECA.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Spears to Foreign Office, 11 November 1943, GB165-0269, Box 3, MECA.

<sup>85</sup> G.E. Maguire, *Anglo-American Policy Towards the Free French* (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1995), 50.

considered to be equivalent to British policy. The article that precipitated Spears' note was published on 15 November in *The Times*. It suggested that the Lebanese government had "acted with misplaced haste." The French cited it to justify the arrests. More importantly, many Lebanese, who believed *The Times* to be the "mouthpiece" of the British government, concluded that Britain was on the side of the French.<sup>86</sup> A few days later, the Foreign Office issued a political directive to officials in Beirut. It cited another, much more blatantly pro-Lebanese article from *The Times* calling for the immediate release and reinstatement of the arrested officials. More importantly, the directive acknowledged that it was now largely impossible to avoid looming questions about independence.<sup>87</sup> A memo from Spears analysing the Lebanese election crisis concluded, "What can only be described as the flowering of national consciousness in the Lebanon has proved to be much stronger than religious fanaticism or sectarian fears."<sup>88</sup> Excluding the above offending article, the vast majority of British press publications were indeed uncompromisingly pro Lebanese.

The strength of the British media response also highlighted the disparity between official and popular sentiment (to the extent that it was reflected in the press). It illustrated how, much like criticisms over the Darlan deal, within Britain the conflict was interpreted according to a strict moral and ethical code. Official analyses of the crisis noted the discrepancy between official rhetoric and the press response: "As if at a single command, the entire British press has launched a large-scale campaign against the Committee of National Liberation."<sup>89</sup> The British press drew on themes of fair play and credibility when they criticised Gaullist policy and demanded that Britain intervene in order to uphold her own honour. One article summarised the crisis by illustrating the French actions as contrary to the rights of a self-governing and sovereign state: "...few people imagined that the local French authorities would go to the length of *suppressing* the National Parliament *freely elected*...in accordance with the

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<sup>86</sup> H.M. Minister Beirut to Foreign Office, 16 November 1943, GB165-0269, Box 3, MECA.

<sup>87</sup> "Lebanese crisis. Daily directive number seven," 18 November 1943, GB165-0269, Box 3, MECA.

<sup>88</sup> "Memo on the recent elections in Lebanon," 25 October 1943, GB165-0269, Box 3, MECA.

<sup>89</sup> "Lebanese Crisis," 15 November 1943, FO 898/197, TNA.

*promises* of independence...<sup>90</sup> The availability of press reports from the broader Middle East also influenced the tone adopted by the British press, just as *The Times* had affected sentiment within Lebanon. *The Times* pointed to the homogeneity of local opinion in the Middle East, writing that Egyptian and Muslim objections were united against the harshness of the French reaction.<sup>91</sup> The CFLN was portrayed as clinging to the “almost non-existent” juridical foundations of the mandate.<sup>92</sup>

The British press did not stop at criticising Free French policy. They launched direct calls for British action, a response that made Whitehall anxious. Although *The Times* took a slightly more reserved stance than *The Guardian*, both called for Britain to involve herself in order to avoid “grave embarrassments,” and to protect her honour.<sup>93</sup> At the centre of the issue, once again, were honour and prestige. Britain must act to uphold her own honour, even though this would likely have negative repercussions for the French position in the Levant. The British press was dominated by the crisis and it was not uncommon to find forecasts predicting both a decline in French prestige and a rise in tensions between Britain and France. The extent of criticism against the CFLN was so pronounced that the Foreign Office expressed concern that Anglo-French relations could be irrevocably damaged. An article in the *Observer* calling for Churchill to “publicly pillory de Gaullism” was cited as a particularly concerning example.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, initial reactions in the Commons, led by the MP for East Fulham Mr William Astor, made it clear that he linked British actions to guarantee Lebanese independence with the maintenance of British honour.<sup>95</sup> MP for Oxford Quintin Hogg argued that the

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<sup>90</sup> My italics. Special Correspondent, “The Danger in the Levant, Background of the French-Lebanese Breach,” *The Guardian*, 15 November 1943, 4.

<sup>91</sup> Our Own Correspondent, “French Attitude on the Mandate,” *The Times*, 13 November 1943, 4.

<sup>92</sup> “Mr. Casey in Beirut: Consultation with British Envoy on the Lebanese Crisis,” *The Guardian*, 15 November 1943, 5.

<sup>93</sup> Leaders, “Trouble in the Lebanon,” *The Times*, 12 November 1943, 5.

<sup>94</sup> “Lebanese Crisis,” 15 November 1943, FO 898/197, TNA.

<sup>95</sup> *Hansard* HC Deb vol. 393 col. 1405 (11 November 1943)

<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1943/nov/11/lebanon-french-authorities-action>. “Criticism in the House of Commons,” *The Guardian*, 12 November 1943, 8.

Lebanese, as “among the most gifted of the Arabs,” should not be pressured into a treaty they did not wish to make.<sup>96</sup>

What emerges particularly clearly when examining the Lebanese parliamentary crisis were the different sources of pressure that impacted upon British foreign policy. The British mass media, Lebanese nationalist groups and British mandate governments in the Middle East all called on Britain to have the internees released and reinstated. However, doing so would severely compromise Anglo-French relations with de Gaulle. Moreover, by intervening, Britain could open the door to criticism over her own imperial policy. Counter-intuitive as it may seem, British intervention, through the use of an ultimatum, represented a compromise that allowed Churchill’s government to resolve the crisis without adopting too vigorous a stance. French acquiescence in releasing the internees allowed Britain to maintain its position of relative neutrality while still conceding to France the ever-decreasing possibility of concluding a favourable treaty with her mandate governments. This British reluctance to be tied to too rigid a policy, whether on the side of the nationalists or in favour of continued French influence, was signalled through the absence of official rhetoric in favour of one alternative or the other. Despite pressure from MPs and the mass media to intervene publically on the side of the nationalists, this approach remained inconsistent with long-term British interests in the region as a whole. This crisis was just the beginning of France’s decent towards imperial violence in the early post-war period. The following chapter will examine how de Gaulle’s tenure as provisional leader of a liberated French state was, much like Vichy, primarily concerned with the rehabilitation of the empire and the French nation as a whole.

## Conclusion

On 21 November, the CFLN announced the release of the internees and the reinstatement of President al-Khoury. However, the crisis was hardly forgotten. For nationalist groups in the Levant it reaffirmed the unacceptability of continued French rule. For de Gaulle it confirmed British duplicity. As the Allied victory appeared more assured, issues of post-war governance, reconstruction and, crucially, French standing in the global order, became supremely

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<sup>96</sup> *Hansard* HC Deb vol. 393 col. 1451 (23 November 1943)  
<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1943/nov/23/lebanon-situation>.

important. The rhetoric of imperial reform during this period was inextricably linked to French sovereignty.<sup>97</sup> In 1943, de Gaulle could not yet claim leadership over metropolitan France, however, he was increasingly asserting power over the empire.<sup>98</sup> His uncompromising attitude towards the Levant remained a source of concern for his British colleagues. Foreign Office directives instructed that comments on the freeing of the Lebanese officials should remain relatively suppressed and refrain from emotive or highly opinionated comment.<sup>99</sup> Again, this stance reaffirmed the British desire to avoid choosing sides. However, nationalist movements within the Levant continued to mobilise rhetoric that confirmed their unwillingness to mitigate their demands for complete independence, even in light of French pressure. After the release of the internees, French rhetoric, in line with underlying policy, indicated a fundamental failure to acknowledge that they had lost all legitimacy within the region.

For de Gaulle and the CFLN, portraying the event as a French affair was a sign of both their own power and legitimacy in the Levant. This remained the case even as the Anglo-French relationship was placed under increasing pressure. Bonnet's press release argued that the decision to release the arrestees was not due to "outside pressure" or "made in answer to anybody."<sup>100</sup> De Gaulle defended his policy in his memoirs, writing that not only had the decision to release the ministers been made long before the ultimatum, the British threat was itself a ploy to "create the impression of a French loss of face."<sup>101</sup> His assertion illustrates his own concerns over the power differences in the relationship and the need to "set the record straight" publically. More importantly, it was part of a continuing rhetoric that sought to guarantee a meaningful place for France in the post-war world. This crisis in 1943, and the mentalities which underlay the actions and reactions on all sides, laid the groundwork for a second series of clashes, this time in Damascus at the close

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<sup>97</sup> Martin Shipway, *The Road to War: France and Vietnam, 1944-1947* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003), 25.

<sup>98</sup> Shennan, *Rethinking France*, 62.

<sup>99</sup> "Foreign Office directions for response on release of president and ministers in Lebanon," 22 November 1943, FO 898/197, TNA.

<sup>100</sup> Special Correspondent, "Lebanese President Reinstated," *The Times*, 22 November 1943, 4. "Le Comité de la libération a pris des dispositions pour régler aussi rapidement et complètement que possible l'incident Libanais," *L'Echo d'Alger*, 22 November 1943, 1.

<sup>101</sup> De Gaulle, *Unity*, 528.

of the war. It is fitting to conclude this broader discussion of war, rhetoric and empire with a crisis that saw the end of conflict in the European theatre and signalled the gradual inception of decolonisation.



## Chapter 9: Renegotiating Empire at the Close of the War

**“Yesterday was the time for battle; the hour for settling accounts had come.”<sup>1</sup>**

### Introduction

On the evening of 29 May 1945, the Syrian city of Damascus was eerily dark. Widespread protests had broken out in response to the French refusal to relinquish control of the local security forces, or *Troupes Speciales*. De Gaulle’s provisional government was continuing to insist on the conclusion of a preferential treaty prior to granting Syrian independence. In the midst of the emerging melee, French commander General Oliva Roget decided to bomb the city into submission. At his orders, telephone lines in the Syrian government offices were severed and the supply of electrical power to the entire city was cut off.<sup>2</sup> The bombardments carried out over Damascus between 29-30 May were a stark reminder of how frequently violence was thought to be a legitimate response in the struggle between imperial dominance and nationalist aspirations. However, this clash had a different outcome, unlike previous occasions when French colonial violence was, if not accepted, then largely ignored by the international community.

On 1 June Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Anthony Eden assured MPs that de Gaulle’s provisional government had instructed its regional officials in Damascus and Beirut to follow the orders of the British Commander in Chief Middle East, General Bernard Paget, in restoring order in the region. William Thorne, representative for West Ham Plaistow asked Eden, “What has been the cause of all this trouble?”. Eden’s response, “It would take rather long to explain,” was fitting given what we know about the long history of Anglo-French rivalry within the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> It is hardly surprising that tensions remained between the ostensible Allies. As the preceding chapters on the Levant have made clear, at all levels British policy was never just about the fate of Syria and Lebanon. It encompassed regional politics that accounted for the increasingly acrimonious state of affairs in Palestine and the broader rise of pan Arab nationalism. Moreover, the end of the war in the European theatre resulted in a

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<sup>1</sup> Charles de Gaulle, *The Complete War Memoirs of Charles de Gaulle*, vol. 3, *Salvation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 872.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 308.

<sup>3</sup> *Hansard* HC Deb vol. 411 col. 491 (1 June 1945)

<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1945/jun/01/syria-and-lebanon-british-intervention>.

decisive shift in power structures, alliances, and, most importantly, in the way in which the post-war future was understood and discussed.

A study that examines the close of the mandate period in the Levant must acknowledge this broader context. Eugene Rogan has argued that the Arab states had historically exerted greater influence during periods in which more than one dominant power was present in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> One of these occasions was the close of the Second World War, when nationalist groups in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt and Palestine were able to turn Anglo-French rivalry to great advantage. The French bombardment of Damascus had real consequences for the international standing of France and to a lesser extent Britain. Faced with a strong anti-imperial rhetoric from the United States, both nations moved quickly to elaborate an imperial policy centred upon liberal reforms. Although Martin Shipway has pointed out that American threats to the imperialists had always been “more rhetorical than actual” this did not rule out real concerns regarding imperial integrity.<sup>5</sup> And, although direct American intervention to secure Levantine independence was unlikely, American rhetorical support to this end was. Crucially, French actions in Syria and Lebanon in 1943 and again in 1945 would invoke strong international condemnation of the use of force against indigenous populations. International revulsion also had the effect of legitimising longstanding nationalist claims. These responses placed Britain’s self-appointed role as regional arbiter and supporter of Egyptian-led Arab unity under constant pressure, both regionally and internationally. In order to maintain pro-British sentiment within the Arab world, British rhetoric was tied to nominal support of Arab unity under the Arab League, which became the public counterpoint to covert pressure on Arab client regimes to abide by British wishes. If Britain could appear to guide rather than obstruct the Arab world, it was hoped that her influence could shift attention away from the futures of *both* Palestine and Syria.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Rogan, *The Arabs*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Shipway, *The Road to War: France and Vietnam, 1944-1947* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003), 65.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Thornhill, “Britain and the Politics of the Arab League, 1943-50,” in *Demise of the British Empire in the Middle East*, eds. Michael J. Cohen and Martin Kolinsky (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 47.

Britain, in a bid to enhance its own influence within the Middle East, would decide to undermine French policy in the Levant the better to win over moderate Arab opinion. This policy of necessary sacrifice would gain credibility as French violence escalated. Taking a more decisive and decidedly public stance against French violence in the Levant represented a new phase – and a chronic breakdown – in the Anglo-French relationship just as the European conflict came to a close and metropolitan France joined the ranks of the victor nations. The overwhelming preoccupation of political rhetoric and press discussion in France at the time centred upon national renewal, and not unlike 1940, insisted upon French metropolitan and imperial sovereignty. The conflicts in the Levant during this period were indicative of the French desire to control events from a position of power. Their disorderly turn thus mirrored a growing frustration among French leaders over the extent to which the British could and would frustrate such plans, first in the Middle East and later in French Indo China.

The French bombardments of Damascus ushered in a post-war phase of Anglo-French relations that would be dominated by issues of European reconstruction and the changing relationships between European states and their protectorates. Stuart Ward has recently argued that the term ‘decolonisation’ became part of a broader European vocabulary employed to cope with the series of changes that were developing throughout the interwar, post-war and eventually post-imperial world.<sup>7</sup> In this context, decolonisation was more of a conceptual framework than a strategic plan, “an idea crafted in Europe to address a European state of mind.”<sup>8</sup> In the 1940s, an era that scholars now consider the beginning of the collapse of the maritime empires, the appearance of the word ‘decolonisation’ remained sporadic and Eurocentric. Indeed, in line with Ward’s analysis, the close of the war in 1945 was more typical of an attempt to renegotiate rather than completely destroy the bonds of empire.

Between 1943-1945, the imperial powers each sought ways to reorder the traditional basis of empire to make it compatible with American anti-imperialism and their own reduced economic and financial circumstances.

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<sup>7</sup> Stuart Ward, “The European Provenance of Decolonization,” *Past and Present* 230, no. 1 (2016): 231.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

Nevertheless, what makes the withdrawal from the Levant so captivating was the continued significance of colonial attachments, and, particularly on the French side, the material impact of an abiding imperial rivalry with Britain. This is where the circle turns fully, as de Gaulle assumed Vichy's conviction that the retention of colonial possessions guaranteed the conservation of French global influence, or at the very least, the ability to lay claim to great power status.<sup>9</sup> Following the Lebanese parliamentary crisis in 1943 and the eventual exit of both French and British troops from the Levant in April 1946, de Gaulle would employ increasingly hostile rhetoric against British policies that he believed sought to negate French influence throughout the two states.

The analysis that follows is structured to facilitate an examination of the underlying motivations that drove British and French policy. To that end, it will recreate the context within which decision-making – and its rhetorical representation – was shaped. These contextual discussions will precede a more detailed exploration of the rhetoric that followed the inter-allied breakdown in the French Levant in 1945. Understanding the interests and motivations of each player facilitates a comparative discussion of their respective policies. This approach, in turn, will allow us to see how rhetoric was employed as a reputation-building tool. It was often at odds with the underlying strategy of both British and French policy. Ultimately, this investigation will lead to three conclusions. The first is that, broadly speaking, the French political spectrum agreed that the restoration of French imperial power was necessary, albeit that doubts remained as to how to achieve this. Although the French provisional government with de Gaulle at its head did not intend to renege on promises of independence to the Levant states, it continued to insist that the transfer of power take place under French control and guidance even in the face of overwhelming nationalist pressure. The provisional government's refusal to come to terms with the inexorable rise of nationalist power was evinced in a willingness to employ displays of violence and repression while simultaneously promising greater freedoms to local populations *within* the colonial framework of a reconstituted post-war French Empire. On an ethical level, perceptions of the validity of the French civilising mission remained intrinsic to the French imperial

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Thomas, "Divisive Decolonization: The Anglo-French Withdrawal from Syria and Lebanon, 1944-46," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 28, no. 3 (2000): 71.

mind set and encouraged the production of rhetoric that was alternatively liberal and patronising.

British concerns, on the other hand, remained resolutely focused upon consolidating their own political and strategic influence within the Middle East. This outcome was to be achieved, if necessary, at French expense. Ironically, for all its underlying ruthlessness, playing the role of impartial, fair-minded arbiter was crucial to British rhetorical ploys devised either to keep or to win friends in the Arab world. This desire to advance a particular public image would place real limitations upon policy making, particularly in the weeks and months following the Damascus bombardments. Seen from a Gaullist perspective, British tactics appeared hypocritical, self-serving and, at root, anti-French. Reluctant to intervene militarily but quite ready to undermine the French position politically and administratively, British Ministers, as well as Britain's regional officials throughout the Middle East, strove to sharpen the rhetorical divide between Britain's support of independence for Syria and Lebanon and France's apparent reluctance to concede it. France was thus backed into a corner rhetorically as well as more tangibly left isolated on the ground in Beirut and Damascus. In one sense, this British tactic failed. The dramatic escalation in the use of violence by French forces in Damascus in May 1945 would ultimately force the British to intervene lest they jeopardise their own credibility in the Middle East as a peacekeeper and, increasingly, peace-enforcer.

Finally, nationalist forces in Syria and Lebanon successfully exerted pressure on the British to act as their proxy protector, an ability that exploited Britain's determination to uphold its broader Middle Eastern interests, not least in Palestine. Syria's nationalists became the determined occupants of the moral high ground. They did so by unreservedly condemning the Provisional Government's failure to honour its 1941 promises of independence. And they demanded unmitigated sovereignty, which ruled out the conclusion of a preferential Franco-Syrian treaty. The Syrians and their Lebanese cousins consolidated this position by first seeking and then securing international condemnation of French violence. French actions were contrasted with depictions of a defenceless civilian population in the Levant states chafing under French colonial oppression. Levant leadership worked through the newly formed United Nations, continuing to exploit the language of the August 1941 Atlantic Charter alongside American and Soviet anti-imperial rhetoric.

Ultimately, Syria's nationalists successfully pressed their demands for statehood, making France's denial of self-determination appear both anachronistic and cruel.

### **Towards Crisis: Early Post-War Policies and Motivations, 1944-1945**

The question at hand is this: how did post-war imperial thinking affect French responses towards the demands of their Middle East mandates? In 1944 de Gaulle's recently-established provisional government was embarking on plans to insert the nation into the victor's circle. In both the official and public mind it was broadly assumed that the empire would remain an important part of post-war France. Martin Thomas has discussed this sentiment and the consensus it produced amongst officials that, in part because they did not hold themselves responsible for past colonial mistakes, they were well placed to launch new schemes of "cultural improvement."<sup>10</sup> Gaston Monnerville, former Undersecretary of State for the Colonies and an erstwhile resister, wrote in May 1945, "Without the empire, France today would be just another liberated country, but thanks to her Empire, France is a victorious country."<sup>11</sup> De Gaulle's personal political ideology made French grandeur or greatness a central element of post-war policy.<sup>12</sup> In the opening paragraph of his *Mémoires de Guerre* he remarks, "In short, to my mind, France cannot be France without greatness."<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, French policy towards the Levant in the early post-war years bore striking similarities to the interwar infantilisation of colonised populations in French black Africa as "big children" who needed guidance from a superior "modern" state.<sup>14</sup> This stance reflected essential assumptions about historic

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Thomas, Bob Moore and L.J. Butler, *Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe's Imperial States, 1918-1975* (London: Hodder Education, 2008), 138.

<sup>11</sup> Gaston Monnerville, Quoted in: Marc Michel, "Decolonisation: French Attitudes and Policies," 83.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce D. Marshall, *The French Colonial Myth and Constitution-Making in the Fourth Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), 83.

<sup>13</sup> Charles de Gaulle, *The Complete War Memoirs of Charles de Gaulle*, vol. 1, *The Call to Honour*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1955), 3. Note: Marshall, in *The French Colonial Myth* has translated "greatness" as "grandeur."

<sup>14</sup> Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 126.

rights within the region, rights that had been routinely upheld by the Mandates Commission throughout the interwar period. However, in May 1945, fundamental divisions still existed within the provisional government as to how the empire should be governed. British policy further impeded French ability to exercise a free hand in the Levant. On the British side, the reality of French violence clashed with their wish to consolidate regional Arab sympathies and avoid becoming embroiled in the inter-communal confrontation unfolding within Palestine. The complexity of these extraneous considerations bore directly on the policies of both sides. The need to rebuild at home and in the empire, anticipations of upcoming elections, and the greater predominance of the United States and the Soviet Union in global politics all played an important role in shaping the context within which policy was created and communicated.

In June 1944 de Gaulle became the head of the French provisional government, returning to Paris that August. This position, and the earlier, ignominious downfall of the Vichy regime sealed his legitimacy as the voice of France. However, the day-to-day concerns that overwhelmed the immediate post-liberation period impinged upon his ability to develop a precise programme of reform or to establish a clearly defined Gaullist political movement.<sup>15</sup>

Individual supporters of the Free French movement were never universally Gaullist. Rather, they had been pulled towards the movement for reasons ranging from shared views on his ideas of French greatness to a basic desire to fight against Nazism.<sup>16</sup> Post liberation France was itself in a state of political flux. As Bruce Marshall has pointed out, the collapse of Vichy left a vacuum on the political right of the party spectrum, right-wing political parties and employer groups being tainted by association with Pétain's regime. Domestic politics were in disarray following the post-liberation purges of suspected collaborators and the rise of new faces to leadership positions.<sup>17</sup> The French Communist party (PCF) had emerged as the most dynamic and the most popular political party, although closely followed by the Christian Democrats of the *Mouvement Républicain Populaire* (MRP) and, to a lesser extent, the newly-reconstructed Socialist Party. De Gaulle was quick to neutralise any would-be challengers

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew Shennan, *Rethinking France: Plans for Renewal 1940-1946* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 65.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Thomas, *Fight or Flight: Britain, France and their Roads from Empire* (London: Oxford University Press, 2014), 47.

<sup>17</sup> Marshal, *French Colonial Myth*, 2-3.

from the three major resistance movements: the *Conseil National de la Résistance* (CNR), *Commission d'Action Militaire* (COMAC) and *Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur* (FFI).<sup>18</sup> His inclusion of Georges Bidault, president of the CNR and a leader of the MRP, in the reshuffled provisional government acted to “symbolically neutralise the CNR as an alternative source of allegiance.”<sup>19</sup> On 27 August de Gaulle informed Bidault’s former organisation that its services were no longer needed. The following day he dissolved the FFI and met personally with the members of COMAC to make it clear that they were to return to their civilian roles now that the war was over.<sup>20</sup>

The liberation of France brought with it a renewed power struggle. Despite the broad cross-party consensus concerning both the necessity for colonial reform and the continuing importance of empire more generally, there remained sharp disagreements over how both objectives were to be advanced. This would become even more apparent as the First Constituent Assembly set about drafting a new constitution in October 1945. In these debates, conflicts between the political parties were focussed upon metropolitan institutions, not on the empire. Legitimate concerns over metropolitan reconstruction moreover, meant that although the ideological importance of empire remained relevant, it was more difficult to generate a coherent and workable plan to assure its continuity. The relative chaos of the early post-war years generated a unique political environment within France, one dominated by the necessity of dealing with floods of refugees and vast shortages of food and housing. Approximately 500,000 French homes were destroyed as a direct consequence of the war between 1944 and 1945 alone.<sup>21</sup> The requirements of dealing with the day-to-day running of metropolitan France meant that the few leading figures within each party who were keenly interested in empire had a significant influence in decision-making. These men included Marius Moutet and P.-O. Lapie from the Socialist Party (SFIO) and P.-E. Viard from the MRP.<sup>22</sup>

The Brazzaville conference, convened in January and February 1944 epitomised a certain strand of official thinking about empire in a post-war

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Shennan, *Rethinking France*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Julian Jackson, *France, the Dark Years: 1940-1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 572.

<sup>21</sup> Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 17.

<sup>22</sup> Shennan, *Rethinking France*, 144.



context. Although the conference was aimed specifically at policy in French Black Africa, it is instructive because it mobilised the same ideas of power and continued influence that were also applied to French policy in the Levant. It was aimed at reshaping French colonial policy through limited reforms that were meant to symbolise metropolitan gratitude for colonial wartime sacrifices. These reforms would provide a roadmap for future French economic and political influence in French Africa. It also served as a public attempt to garner international support for the French empire project. As a propaganda event it was quite successful.<sup>23</sup> However, France's premature withdrawal from the war in 1940 and subsequent policy of Franco-German cooperation had damaged its credibility as an imperial powerhouse.<sup>24</sup> The provisional government also had to contend with increasing colonial unrest brought on by unprecedented levels of wartime requisitioning and demands on labour resources. The presence of "anti-colonial rhetoric from the United States, the Soviet Union and the Atlantic Charter was likewise having a significant effect on the educated strata of colonial populations."<sup>25</sup> The task of creating a workable colonial policy via Paris and the Brazzaville Conference was further complicated by the attitudes of local colonial officials. Many of these men, including Oliva Roget, were career administrators who remained tied to historic assumptions of cultural and racial superiority.<sup>26</sup>

This gathering, and as Martin Shipway has described it, the resulting "Brazzaville myth," brought to light two competing interpretations of imperial governance. Despite its success in publicising plans for a reformed and liberal empire, the conference set the stage for a clash between federalist aspirations and traditional republican ideals grounded in assimilation.<sup>27</sup> Socialist politician and Consultative Assembly member Jules Moch championed the latter model. He argued that federal concepts conflicted with basic republican doctrines

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<sup>23</sup> Martin Shipway, "Reformism and the French 'Official Mind': The 1944 Brazzaville Conference and the Legacy of the Popular Front," in *French Colonial Empire and the Popular Front*, eds. Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1999), 136-137.

<sup>24</sup> Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 354.

<sup>25</sup> James I. Lewis, "The MRP and the Genesis of the French Union, 1944-1948," *French History* 12, no. 3 (1998): 280.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Aldrich, *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996), 200.

<sup>27</sup> Shipway, *The Road to War*, 38.

enshrined in the idea of a “one and indivisible republic.”<sup>28</sup> Henri Laurentie, head of the political section of the *Commissariat aux Colonies* and the organisational heart of the conference, remained supportive of a federalist empire, enshrined in the French Union plan. However, the commission of experts that was convened after the conference to debate the merits of the two plans argued that a federal system would fail. Similarly, a study group of experts that met in 1945 argued that the suggested federal assembly, made up of representatives from both the metropole and overseas territories would be resented within mainland France due to a perceived loss of sovereignty.<sup>29</sup> Despite agreeing on the continued value of the empire, this consensus did not translate into agreement on how to govern it. Indeed, the conference itself was limited to an advisory role. Moreover, while it could suggest changes to the Consultative Assembly and the Provisional Government both of these organs lacked the constituent power that would allow them to actually institute any structural reforms to current imperial organisations.<sup>30</sup>

Barnett Singer and John Langdon have argued that, from 1943, de Gaulle began to view colonial demands for increased autonomy more favourably. The General supported the idea of the French Union system. However, the reforms that de Gaulle envisaged were workable only within the existing colonial framework.<sup>31</sup> On 8 December 1943 he spoke of the future of French Indo China, pledging to deliver “greater sensitivity to local traditions and greater access to state services and employment.”<sup>32</sup> Likewise, de Gaulle’s January 1944 address at the Brazzaville conference celebrated “France’s civilizing mission, its obligation to develop its colonies economically, and its duty to bring progress and dignity to those who had laboured so diligently on its behalf.”<sup>33</sup> As Martin Shipway has pointed out, “colonial reform was designed at

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>29</sup> This concern existed despite the fact that under the proposed system, foreign policy and education would remain in the metropole. The Assembly would examine budgets and economic planning.

<sup>30</sup> Marshall, *French Colonial Myth*, 104.

<sup>31</sup> Barnett Singer and John Langdon, *Cultured Force: Makers and Defenders of the French Colonial Empire* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 244.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

every stage to consolidate and rationalise the empire..." in line with the assimilationist thesis of cultural superiority.<sup>34</sup>

De Gaulle was prepared to back a more liberal framework of political institutions empire-wide. However, these concessions were not intended to be the precursor to political autonomy. They were, rather, "considered only as a reflection of French generosity, in response to acts of heroism on her behalf."<sup>35</sup> Edward Griggs, the British Minister Resident in the Middle East from 21 November 1944, recalled a conversation with a member of the French *Délégation Générale*. In it, the latter asserted that no French government could allow itself to be held responsible for sacrificing the country's special position in the Levant. This privileged role was as important to the psychological well being of France as the reserves of oil that accompanied it.<sup>36</sup> Even the PCF, which had devoted much of its resources between 1939-June 1941 to criticising British imperialism, believed that despite nationalist movements, the empire ultimately *desired* indeed *demande*d to remain a part of France.<sup>37</sup> Importantly, such sentiments were not limited to the political elite. French public opinion likewise assumed that after the war France would resume her position of prestige and power, and that this would include its imperial projects.<sup>38</sup>

British policy in late 1944 and early 1945 was not so far removed from the French perspective. In November 1944 the Colonial Office was editing a memorandum entitled "The Future of the Colonial Peoples." Princeton University Press subsequently published this document under the authorship of an acknowledged authority on British imperial administration, Lord Hailey. It was distributed to British consulates throughout the United States via the British Information Services in New York. It was intended to "prove helpful to Americans who are often inclined to glib and oversimplified solutions for the problems of other nations."<sup>39</sup> Like the Brazzaville conference, it was reform-minded and suggested replacing the mandates system with a series of Regional Commissions. These commissions would suggest ways to coordinate

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<sup>34</sup> Shipway, *Reformism*, 131.

<sup>35</sup> Marshall, *French Colonial Myth*, 118.

<sup>36</sup> Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1962), 278.

<sup>37</sup> Shennan, *Rethinking France*, 164. Marshall, *French Colonial Myth*, 145.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas, Moore, and Butler, *Crises of Empire*, 138.

<sup>39</sup> Lord Hailey, *The Future of Colonial Peoples* (London: Princeton University Press, 1944), Back Cover.

colonial security, healthcare and trade. There was a great deal of concern, evident within the text, regarding the desire to preserve the current system of free trade or the open door policy. However, of even greater interest was the belief that sympathetic American opinion could help preserve the British Empire. Mr A.H. Poynton in the Colonial Office was tasked with soliciting feedback on drafts of the publication. One response suggested reducing the number of direct quotations from British official statements as to an American reader they were "...just too starry eyed to be credible." Another advised impressing American readers with a table showing the present populations and geographical boundaries of different empires to remind them that the British Empire was neither the sole nor the largest in existence: "The Americans like figures anyway."<sup>40</sup> In 1944 Britain's colonial bureaucracy was thus up to defend the concept of empire, and it was doing so through rhetoric, directed specifically at an American audience. The undeniable power of American influence will become even more apparent in the British response to the French bombardments of Damascus in May 1945, and will be addressed in more detail below.

The absence of Britain's Middle East mandates from "The Future of the Colonial Peoples" was an indication of how volatile the situation was in that region. Uprisings in the Levant could easily spread throughout the Middle East.<sup>41</sup> Like France, Britain was confronting reconstruction at home while renegotiating its imperial commitments abroad. Unlike France, its position as an undisputed victor and its still preponderant military and political strength in the Middle East placed it in a comparatively advantageous position. Britain casually supported the Arab League, founded on 22 March 1945, if only as an opportunity to encourage the creation of power structures that would support continued British influence. British Ambassador in Cairo Lord Killearn<sup>42</sup> wrote in regards to the Arab League, "We have a long-term interest in promoting through Arab co-operation the material welfare and the satisfaction of the sentimental

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<sup>40</sup> "The Future of the Colonial Peoples," Defence and General Department, Colonial Office, 30 October 1944, CO 968/162/1, The National Archives, [Henceforward TNA].

<sup>41</sup> Woodward, *British Foreign Policy*, 277.

<sup>42</sup> Previously referred to as Sir Miles Lampson, he was elevated to the peerage in 1943.

aspirations of these countries as far as our imperial interests permit.<sup>43</sup> This attitude was echoed within the Foreign Office, where it was considered wise to encourage Arab unity on the grounds that it was unlikely to succeed in the long term.<sup>44</sup> Appearing to support Egyptian regional leadership would also make it possible for Britain to maintain the Suez Canal Zone base and avoid discussing the futures of Palestine and Syria. Moreover, Britain held the key to two league concerns: fear that French power would be re-established in Syria and demands that the 1939 White Paper promises be implemented in Palestine.<sup>45</sup>

British policy in 1945 would remain firmly committed to retaining Arab support for its presence in the Middle East. However, in contrast to the Lebanese parliamentary crisis in November 1943, the escalation of French confrontational tactics in Damascus made it impossible to avoid active and public intervention on the side of the nationalist movements. Indeed the extent of French violence was itself a shocking turn of events. Britain chose to act after receiving reports that indiscriminate shelling and machine gun fire were being carried out by French forces in Damascus. Crucially, this decision was finalised before receiving a reply from President Truman on the American stance.<sup>46</sup> The further consolidation and hardening of Syrian official and public opinion by 1944 against any sort of compromise with the French added to the explosiveness of the atmosphere.

The following section will examine how this unstable context and the policy motivations on each side promoted a particular line of rhetoric. On the British side, the bombardments of Damascus meant abandoning any hopes for the successful conclusion of a Franco-Syrian treaty. Although officials would note their annoyance over what they saw as the manipulative and inflexible stance of Syrian nationalists, the violence of the event and the overwhelming outcry of international opinion precluded any chance of the desired compromise. The mobilisation of internationalist rhetoric against the oppression of smaller states marked the newfound moral strength of the Syrian position. Indeed, representatives from trustee nations were at the same time being

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<sup>43</sup> Wm Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945-1951: Arab Nationalism, The United States and Postwar Imperialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 128.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>45</sup> Thornhill, *Politics of the Arab League*, 49.

<sup>46</sup> C.M. (45) 3<sup>rd</sup> Conclusions, 31 May 1945, CAB 65/53/3, TNA.

allowed to voice their repugnance for empire in the international forum of the San Francisco Conference. The French provisional government, on the other hand, desired to assert the solidarity of the French nation and its concurrent right to govern its overseas territories. These twin preoccupations led to an increasingly violent and anti-British rhetoric. In post-war France, the rise of a “colonial myth,” which linked imperial possessions with international power only heightened mistrust between the French and the British as they attempted to negotiate the future of the Levant.<sup>47</sup> The end of the war was epitomised by national struggles to maintain, reassert or gain power. For France and Britain, power was most often linked to their respective imperial or mandated territories and was carried out under the shadow of emerging American and Soviet military and political domination. The discussions of empire, and particularly, imperial reform that were emerging in late 1944 and 1945 reflected this new balance of power.

### **“The World’s Appearance Changed:” Syria 1945<sup>48</sup>**

French policy at the close of the European conflict was devised amidst a significantly altered domestic and global political landscape. Attempting to recover from a devastating defeat and the taint of the collaborationist government that had followed, the provisional government embarked upon a programme of reconstruction and renewal at home and overseas. The discussion above made it clear that consensus existed on two points: France must regain its place as a great power and the preservation of the empire was integral to this goal. However, the failure of the provisional government to agree on how to meet nationalist demands and restructure the empire triggered inconsistent and confused rhetoric. Public messages and statements tried to justify policies under Republican ideals of assimilation, cultural superiority and paternity. At the same time they touted France’s liberal policies reflected in the Brazzaville conference and reiterated promises to honour the independence declarations of 1941. Such rhetoric tried to preserve the legitimacy of the French imperial project, or at the very least the right to manage its reformation.

Alongside legitimacy, the provisional government was intent on reasserting the sovereignty of France as an “imperial nation state,” a concept

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas, “Divisive Decolonization”, 71, 80.

<sup>48</sup> De Gaulle, *Salvation*, 872.

that has been developed in detail by historian Gary Wilder. France's imperial status, he argues constituted a guarantee of international power and economic prosperity and was a mind-set that was deeply rooted in the interwar years of the 1930s.<sup>49</sup> This celebration of France greatness through empire had been most blatant during the 1931 Paris International Colonial Exposition, which emphasised the importance of *une plus grande France*.<sup>50</sup> In 1945, the provisional government again swung into action to shore up French imperial influence. Mounting frustrations over what were perceived as attempts to usurp the French position in the Middle East contributed to an increasingly hostile attitude towards the British. However, de Gaulle and his provisional government lacked the material and financial resources to resist British military and political pressure following the Damascus bombardments. This impotency highlighted the contradiction between French claims of legitimacy and sovereignty and its material inability to maintain such policies under nationalist pressure. British rhetoric on the other hand, sought to achieve to balance (with limited success) between supporting French desires to conclude a favourable Franco-Levantine treaty and strident nationalist demands for uncompromised independence. This stance was reflected in Churchill's addresses as well as discussions within the Cabinet. Foreign Office documents similarly emphasised the need to avoid publicity that would compromise the British image in the Middle East. We know that the spectre of unrest in Palestine was a long-standing concern in British policy. A crisis here could spread to other Arab countries, a fear that had been prevalent since the Peel Commission first proposed the partition of Palestine in 1937.<sup>51</sup> The analysis that follows will examine how, for both France and Britain, longer-term issues of prestige, influence and regional power influenced the construction and communication of Middle East policy. Ultimately, rhetoric on both sides sought to legitimise their actions using language steeped in the idea of rights and responsibilities. Gaullist pronouncements focussed upon historic claims to the Levant. On the other hand, their British rivals drew upon American policy as a means to validate their position in the Middle East and demonstrate their selfless role as an impartial regional negotiator.

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<sup>49</sup> Wilder, *French Imperial Nation-State*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Herman Lebovics, *Imperialism and the Corruption of Democracies* (Durham NC, Duke University Press, 2006), xiii.

<sup>51</sup> Yehoshua Poruth, *In Search of Arab Unity 1930-1945* (London: Frank Cass, 1986), 110.

In January 1945, Terence Shone, the newly appointed Counsellor at the British Embassy in Cairo, informed the Foreign Office that there was overwhelming opposition in Syria to a treaty with France.<sup>52</sup> French intelligence described frequent student demonstrations and general unrest throughout Syria. In the same month, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden wrote to Killearn confirming that Britain would oppose French efforts to re-establish themselves in the Levant.<sup>53</sup> This policy, however, still did not rule out the possibility of a compromise between France and the Levant States. Britain continued efforts into early 1945 aimed at persuading both Syria and Lebanon to come to a settlement with France.<sup>54</sup> Such a treaty would guarantee French precedence in the Levant through a network of preferential economic, military and cultural agreements. Edward Spears, who was a vocal critic of the French position in the Levant, fell foul of this tactic, causing unprecedented tension between himself and the Foreign Office.<sup>55</sup> His opinions were given a great deal of space within the Arab press, and their emotional rhetoric gave rise to concern in the Gaullist provisional government.<sup>56</sup> They also contradicted directions from London, which were to placate French demands in the hope that the Levant states would agree to conclude the desired treaties. In late August 1944 René Massigli, de Gaulle's commissioner for foreign affairs had asked Eden to issue a public declaration in support of a Franco-Levantine treaty. To Spears' horror, Eden wrote to Massigli saying that the British Government "would welcome an agreement between France and the Levant states freely to conclude the treaties foreseen in the declaration of independence, as a convenient method of determining their future relations."<sup>57</sup> This statement not only caused a great deal of embarrassment for Spears, it angered the Syrian press, who interpreted it as a reversal in British policy. Eden pressured Churchill for seven months before the latter finally asked Spears to resign in December 1944. The Foreign Office, anxious to downplay his exit, explained this development to the press as his

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<sup>52</sup> Weekly Political Intelligence Summaries, 3 January 1945, FO 371/50421, TNA.

<sup>53</sup> Eden to Killearn, 4 January 1945, FO 371/40307, TNA.

<sup>54</sup> Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920-1945* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1987), 616.

<sup>55</sup> Eyal Ziser, *Lebanon: The Challenge of Independence* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 90.

<sup>56</sup> Telegramme, Caire à Paris, 25 January 1945, 76CPCOM/35, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, [Henceforward MAE].

<sup>57</sup> Massigli to Eden, Eden to Massigli, 24 August 1944, FO 371/40302, TNA.



eagerness to return to his Parliamentary duties, and not a sign that Britain was preparing to renege on promises of Levantine independence.<sup>58</sup> Shone replaced Spears on 15 December.

After the Yalta Conference, held between 4 and 11 February 1945, Churchill addressed the Commons, citing a number of crucial points regarding France and the Levant. In this 27 February address, Churchill described the vital role that France would play in the post-war governance of Germany and the formation of the United Nations institutions. France itself had been excluded from Yalta, leading to “disappointment and depression in Paris newspaper comment.”<sup>59</sup> Churchill’s statement attempted to dispel growing suspicions that Britain was preparing to assume France’s position in the Levant. He emphasised that, despite a friendly meeting with Syrian President Shukri al-Quwatli, “there was no question of shaping new policy for the Middle East.”<sup>60</sup> He reiterated his hope that an agreement could be reached between the three states, which would recognise traditional French privileges. However, the final paragraph of Churchill’s statement was a warning that acknowledged the new reality of American and Soviet power. There was a growing gap between British verbal *support* for such an agreement and British *willingness* and *ability* to enforce this policy. Only two weeks before the May crisis Lord Cranborne met with Syrian Prime Minister al-Khuri. The latter expressed his concern over the trusteeship system being debated at the San Francisco conference and asked for safeguards to Syrian independence.<sup>61</sup>

Engaging powerful opinion outside of Britain was a way for Churchill to follow a middle line the aim of which was to avoid completely alienating either the French provisional government or the Syrian nationalists. Making such statements within the Commons lent his words additional gravitas, and ensured the attention of target audiences in France and the United States. Massigli, who was by now the French ambassador in London following his dismissal as Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, took note of this tactic. In his analysis of

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<sup>58</sup> Foreign Office to Spears, 4 December 1944, GB165-0269 Box 2 File 1, Middle East Centre Archives [Henceforward MECA].

<sup>59</sup> Weekly Political Intelligence Summary, 31 January 1945, FO 371/50421, TNA.

<sup>60</sup> *Hansard* HC Deb vol. 408 col. 1287 (27 February 1945) <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1945/feb/27/crimea-conference>.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Record of a Conversation between Lord Cranborne and the Syrian Prime Minister’, 15 May 1945, CO 968/162/4, TNA.

Churchill's speech he pointed out the proposed divergence between British and American/Soviet policy.<sup>62</sup> Churchill's pronouncement, however, made it clear that in early 1945 the British had not yet ruled out the possibility of compromise in the Levant, however slim the likelihood of achieving it. Massigli wrote to Paris that he had received assurances from some friends in Parliament that they would do everything possible to avoid the Levant question becoming an issue in Anglo-French Relations. To this end, the French would also attempt to avoid publically clashing with Spears.<sup>63</sup> On the back of Massigli's advice, he was categorised as a rogue, who should be ignored if possible: "Le mieux serait de ne pas attacher à l'activité de ce personnage plus d'importance qu'il n'en méritait."<sup>64</sup>

Alongside these attempts to placate the French, British officials in Syria were offering advice to local leaders. In the days leading up to and following the Damascus crisis, they encouraged heads of government in both Levant states to mobilise world opinion to their advantage. On 21 May General Paget met with the acting Syrian Prime Minister Jamil al-Mardam. Paget urged Mardam to avoid acts of violence against the French authorities. They should take care that "provocation as there was came from the other side. International opinion was rallying to them..."<sup>65</sup> Encouraging the resolution of the crisis through international consensus would, Paget hoped, force France to give up its claims to a preferential treaty. This voluntary withdrawal would also allow Britain to emerge relatively unscathed without having had to intervene on a military level. Paget was well aware that neither the United States nor the Soviet Union supported the idea of a favoured position for France in the Levant.<sup>66</sup>

Amidst the rising tensions in Syria and Lebanon, de Gaulle issued a number of official statements that sought to confirm not only the legitimacy of the French presence, but more importantly, the *ability* of the French state to control events in the region. On 5 February de Gaulle gave a radio broadcast announcing his desire to conclude an alliance with Britain after eliminating

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<sup>62</sup> Telegramme, Massigli à Paris, 28 February 1945, 76CPCOM/35, MAE.

<sup>63</sup> Telegramme, Massigli à Paris, 25 January 1945, 76CPCOM/35, MAE.

<sup>64</sup> Telegramme, Dejean à Paris, 22 February 1945, 76CPCOM/35, MAE.

<sup>65</sup> "Notes on a Meeting between C-in-C Middle East, HMM Beirut, and Jamil Mardam Bey MFA and Acting Prime Minister of Syria," 21 May 1945, WO 201/1019, TNA.

<sup>66</sup> *Hansard* HC Deb vol. 408 col. 1290 (27 February 1945)

<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1945/feb/27/crimea-conference>.

“certain vestiges of an outdated rivalry in this or that part of the world.” A Foreign Office comment on the text of the broadcast noted dryly, “This allusion to outdated rivalry refers, of course, in particular to Syria and the Lebanon...”<sup>67</sup> De Gaulle made further statements from Paris emphasising that France carried the full responsibility for maintaining order in the Levant and to that end would defend its interests against would be challengers.<sup>68</sup> The sharp contrast of these statements with France’s actual capabilities to impose its will in the Levant was proof of a deeper concern: the desire to drive events in the Levant as a sovereign and capable nation. Strong rhetoric was a substitute for actual material power as the provisional government attempted to shore up the empire. In early May, nationalist uprisings in Sétif, Eastern Algeria would result in an estimated 6000 Algerian deaths.<sup>69</sup> Likewise, the still uncertain future of French Indo China and increasing American involvement in this region made a powerful front highly necessary. At every turn, de Gaulle’s speeches, press releases from the provisional government, and the mass media asserted France’s right and ability to protect its colonial holdings and resolve metropolitan issues.

French relations with Syria came to a head in May, when additional troop reinforcements arrived in the Levant. This move could only be perceived by nationalist groups as armed pressure to conclude a treaty that would be favourable to France. On 6 May approximately 900 Senegalese reinforcements arrived in Beirut despite British warnings that their presence would escalate tensions.<sup>70</sup> In the days to follow, VE day celebrations saw clashes develop in Beirut, Damascus and Homs. In sharp contrast to the liberal rhetoric of empire that had followed the Brazzaville conference local celebrations appeared to reaffirm French rights and ownership in the Levant. Reports described French lorries and parachutes decorated with the tricolour and shouts of “This is your country de Gaulle.”<sup>71</sup> French Delegate General to the Levant Paul Beynet (who had replaced Yves Chataigneau in March 1944) reported that fights had broken

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<sup>67</sup> Weekly Political Intelligence Summary, 7 February 1945, FO 371/50421, TNA.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Shipway, *The Road to War*, 72.

<sup>70</sup> Weekly Political Intelligence Summary, 16 May 1945, FO 371/50421, TNA.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

out in Damascus between Francophiles and “fanatic Muslims.”<sup>72</sup> This sharp division between pro-French (good) and nationalist (evil) illustrates how local officials justified violent actions against indigenous communities.

At the same time, hundreds of delegates and representatives were discussing the future of colonial empires and the role of the trusteeship commission at the San Francisco conference with passion but also a great deal of uncertainty. Commander Harold Stassen, a former governor of Minnesota and now American conference delegate gave a speech that moved decisively away from expectations that America would swiftly dismantle the colonial empires. He argued that delegates should see the future of the world organised around interdependence rather than independence and went as far as to compare the U.S. federal system with the colonial empires.<sup>73</sup> At the 21 March debate in the French Consultative Assembly earlier that year, Commissioner for Foreign Affairs Georges Bidault had supported the invitation of Syrian and Lebanese delegates to the conference. The internationalisation of nationalist demands in the Levant through this forum would make it even more difficult for France to retain control over the independence process.

Between the troop arrivals and the actual bombardments, the atmosphere in Syria deteriorated further, the mounting tension manifested in mass demonstrations and sporadic violence. French analyses of the Lebanese and Syrian press reported that the additional troops and the VE day celebrations had led to a spike in anti-French publications.<sup>74</sup> France continued to refuse requests to transfer the local security forces, the *Troupes Spéciales*, to Syrian control, a pre-condition on which Prime Minister al-Mardam was insistent. The *Troupes Spéciales* were led by French commanders and contained a high percentage of participants from minority communities. Many were themselves reluctant to be transferred to the local government, which had little money to spend on defence.<sup>75</sup> In the summer of 1941, de Gaulle believed

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<sup>72</sup> Telegramme, Beynet à Bidault, 14 May 1945, 76CPCOM/35, MAE.

<sup>73</sup> Wm Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 535.

<sup>74</sup> Beynet, ‘Revue de la presse Libanaise et Syrienne’, 11-18 May 1945, 380QONT/277, MAE.

<sup>75</sup> Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Arab Independence: Riad el-Solh and the Makers of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 547.

that having al-Mardam involved in negotiations, as he had been in 1936, would be favourable to the conclusion of a treaty.<sup>76</sup> Nearly ten years later, al-Mardam was much less willing to strike a compromise. Beynet had warned de Gaulle on 5 April that continuing to refuse al-Mardam's demands would spark a crisis. De Gaulle, however, refused to believe that Syrian nationalists would not fold under French pressure. He told Beynet that the questions of independence and French military presence in the Levant were two distinct and unrelated issues.<sup>77</sup> On 26 May the Foreign Office issued an official British statement. It was typical of the diplomatic middle ground favoured in London. It expressed "regret that the improved atmosphere should have been disturbed by the despatch of certain French reinforcements, and that these should have been the occasion for breaking off negotiations for a general settlement."<sup>78</sup>

On 29 May at 7:00 p.m. French troops under the order of commander General Fernand Oliva Roget began the shelling and aerial bombardment of the vicinity around the Damascus Parliament building. In the aftermath, it was impossible to tell how many hundreds had died. North and West African colonial troops were under orders to bury Syrian casualties in mass graves.<sup>79</sup> De Gaulle maintained that French forces issued a cease-fire on 30 May at 11:00 p.m., which went into effect on 31 May.<sup>80</sup> However the official British report stated that firing continued through 31 May.<sup>81</sup> Condemnation for Roget's actions was immediate. In San Francisco, delegates from the Middle East lambasted French revolutionary tradition. The Indian representative summarised the speech made by his Iraqi colleague: "There were certain countries which regarded liberty, equality and fraternity as fit for home consumption only and not for export."<sup>82</sup> The conference provided a convenient forum for delegates to reiterate their commitment to the broad right of self-government.

As the crisis escalated in Damascus, local French officials were quick to blame the British. They accused British censors of refusing to allow the

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<sup>76</sup> Spears, to Spears Mission and British Embassy Cairo, 13 June 1941, GB165-0269 Box 1A, MECA.

<sup>77</sup> Reunion au Sujet des Affaires du Levant, 5 April 1945, 380QONT/277, MAE.

<sup>78</sup> Weekly Political Intelligence Summary, 30 May 1945, FO 371/50422, TNA

<sup>79</sup> Thomas, *Fight or Flight*, 70.

<sup>80</sup> Charles De Gaulle, *Discours et Messages Pendant la Guerre Juin 1940-Janvier 1946* (Paris: Plon, 1970), 563.

<sup>81</sup> Woodward, *British Foreign Policy*, 280.

<sup>82</sup> Louis, *Imperialism at Bay*, 543.

publication of French justifications for the bombardments. Syrian censorship was under the direction of the Chief Censor in Palestine, and was very much under British control.<sup>83</sup> This response was notable because it recognised the role of rhetoric as a fundamental tool of foreign policy: the ability to communicate and justify actions publically. A secretary of the British Legation responded scornfully to French complaints over the publication of anti-French articles in the local media, saying crisply that it was difficult to forbid the press from publishing the opinion of the entire country.<sup>84</sup> French claims suggested that the legitimacy of a particular policy could be affected by how it was explained. By protesting against the actions of British censors, local French officials alleged that rhetoric played a fundamental role in the creation of regional and global opinion.

British officials, who met with the Lebanese Prime Minister on 30 May, echoed this belief. General Staff member Brigadier William Oliver, accompanied by Mr Young of the British Legation, advised Riad el-Solh to refrain from any violent response in order to give world opinion a chance “to be transformed into action.”<sup>85</sup> Paget also stressed to Syrian President al-Quwatli the benefits of managing the Syrian image through rhetoric. At a 28 June meeting, he suggested a number of ways to preserve world sympathy towards Syrian demands: “The Syrians should avoid all occasions for criticism. The Syrians should avoid inflammatory speeches, dangerous propaganda, demonstrations by badly disciplined students, bonfires of books and especially lack of control by the press.”<sup>86</sup> Syrian and Lebanese policy was explicit in its goal of achieving independence from French control. However, the above advice demonstrates how the British also tried to “manage” the crisis at a local level. By encouraging the Syrian administration not to escalate the situation rhetorically, Paget was also attempting to minimise the likelihood of British military and political intervention. Moreover, in the event that British troops had to intervene to quell a backlash of local violence towards the French, their own regional image would very likely suffer irreparable damage.

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<sup>83</sup> War Cabinet, Committee on Foreign (Allied) Resistance (Syria), 27 August 1941, GB165-0269 Box 1 File 4, MECA.

<sup>84</sup> Telegramme, Beynet à Bidault, 26 May 1945, 380QONT/277, MAE.

<sup>85</sup> Notes from Meeting between BGS Ninth Army and Lebanese Prime Minister, 30 May 1945, WO 201/1019, TNA.

<sup>86</sup> Notes from Meeting between Commander in Chief Middle East and the President of the Syrian Republic, 28 June 1945, WO 201/1019, TNA.

In London, Cabinet meetings on 30 May reflected a great deal of concern for the ramifications of French actions. However, intervening in the Levant required careful planning. Churchill stressed that Britain should not become wholly responsible for resolving the crisis. He argued that it was crucial to “carry the United States with us” by getting them “publicly to declare their support for our action.”<sup>87</sup> Eden expressed similar concerns, which highlighted the importance of Middle East opinion towards the British. He argued that armed intervention seemed inevitable as, “If it were seen that we were powerless to prevent the French from persisting in their irresponsible conduct, our influence throughout the whole of the Middle East would be undermined.”<sup>88</sup> The Cabinet was clearly formulating the British response with an acute awareness of how intervention or non-intervention would affect British credibility and prestige, especially within their remaining mandates.

On 31 May Churchill sent a message to de Gaulle demanding that French troops be confined to their barracks and a cease-fire ordered. Paget would take over responsibility for restoring order in Damascus. Churchill also made the strategic decision to publicise this order, which prompted two statements from de Gaulle in defence of French policy. De Gaulle’s statements drew upon core themes of sovereignty, solidarity and capability to defend Roget’s actions. What these statements showed above all was how important it was for de Gaulle to be able to demonstrate that France was still a legitimate global power. In his first statement he declared that a cease-fire had been ordered for 30 May, a day before the British note.<sup>89</sup> At a press conference held in Paris on 2 June to clear up any misunderstanding in “world-wide and...national public opinion” de Gaulle stressed again the correctness of French actions.<sup>90</sup> Specifically, he argued that all of France supported the policy and that British interference had promoted unrest in the region.<sup>91</sup> De Gaulle also referred repeatedly to the Lyttleton-de Gaulle agreement in an attempt to establish a legal basis for his accusations.

His address to the press cast France as a victim both of British interference and of local intractability. On three occasions in the speech, de

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<sup>87</sup> C.M. (45) 2<sup>nd</sup> Conclusions, 30 May 1945, CAB 65/53/2, TNA.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Weekly Political Intelligence Summaries, 6 June 1945, FO 371/50422, TNA.

<sup>90</sup> De Gaulle, *Salvation*, 889.

<sup>91</sup> De Gaulle, *Discours et Messages*, 560, 565.

Gaulle emphasised French good faith, declaring that France was “prête à négocier” the conditions under which Syrian and Lebanon would exercise their independence.<sup>92</sup> Going further, he applauded the prospect of a grand settlement in Middle East affairs through international cooperation.<sup>93</sup> Foreign Office intelligence described de Gaulle’s press statement as “marked by a number of half truths, suppressions of inconvenient facts and insinuations against Great Britain.”<sup>94</sup> At the same time, de Gaulle relied upon a number of more traditional justifications to explain France’s privileged role in the Levant. He spoke of the eminence of the French position due to intellectual, spiritual and moral contributions.<sup>95</sup> These responsibilities, he went on, were justified because they were lifting the Levant towards “civilisation.”<sup>96</sup> Blaming Britain for the crisis was a way to suggest that France was one of the victims of the ordeal. This tactic was also symptomatic of the historic rivalry and suspicion that made up regional Anglo-French relations. Similarly, the Syrian and Lebanese refusal to make economic, strategic and cultural agreements with France was rooted in a deep culture of mistrust and hatred of past repressive policies. However, despite de Gaulle’s impassioned statement, he wrote later in his memoirs that the strength of his response was met largely with disapproval in both the diplomatic corps and the Consultative Assembly. The former stressed the need to maintain a positive Anglo-French relationship and the latter criticised the hard headedness of de Gaulle’s actions. These disagreements within the provisional government over his reaction ultimately undermined the authenticity of Gaullist arguments. The French press, furthermore, contained no displays of “national resolution” and only published small articles that left the reader to conclude that Syria was a lost cause.<sup>97</sup>

Throughout the affair, and in contrast to the high levels of criticism directed towards the French after the 1943 parliamentary crisis in Lebanon, the British press remained unexpectedly balanced. Massigli’s analyses of these publications expressed surprise at the level of objectivity.<sup>98</sup> Although the

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 561, 564, 565.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 564-565.

<sup>94</sup> Weekly Political Intelligence Summaries, 6 June 1945, FO 371/50422, TNA.

<sup>95</sup> De Gaulle, *Discours et Messages*, 559.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> De Gaulle, *Salvation*, 890-891.

<sup>98</sup> Telegramme, Massigli à Bidault, 31 May 1945, 76CPCOM, MAE; Telegramme, Massigli à Bidault, 31 May 1945, 380QONT/277, MAE.



clashes were extensively reported within British papers, the analysis was largely focussed upon the state of the Anglo-French relationship and the international response towards the bombardments. *The Guardian* described British intervention as “humiliating” to the French and argued that it had provoked concerns over a possible loss of French prestige.<sup>99</sup> American opinion was depicted as unanimous in condemning French actions and Russian sources were quoted arguing that French policy in the Levant was inconsistent with decisions taken at Dumbarton Oaks and the aims of the San Francisco Conference.<sup>100</sup> Responding to a review of the bombardments published in the *Economist*, Massigli noted the tendency to search out British responsibility in the Levant affair. In the same note, he speculated that this inclination was the result of a gap between popular and government views within Britain.<sup>101</sup> How can this gap be explained in light of the British government’s continued regional engagement? As policy documents have shown, officials in the Cabinet as well as the Foreign Office were primarily preoccupied with how British actions would affect opinion *within* the Arab world. In regards to opinion in the metropole, British officials preferred to avoid drawing attention to the Levant crisis. There was a notable absence of official statements, and those that were issued remained highly neutral in tone. When Churchill asked if the British telegram to Truman should be given to the press for publication, Eden responded, “No need to inflame opinion here. It is inflamed.”<sup>102</sup>

British official statements attempted to remain aloof from events. Eden’s initial Commons declaration on 29 May was diplomatic and noncommittal, to the great annoyance of Spears. The Foreign Minister expressed the hope that those involved would behave with “caution and prudence” and he did not criticise the French.<sup>103</sup> This tactic was motivated by efforts to avoid *both* French and American criticism. Foreign Office official Sir Orme Sargent wrote to Eden in early July to warn him that if British reinforcements were sent to Syria they

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<sup>99</sup> “French “Stunned” by our Action,” *The Guardian*, 1 June 1945, 5.

<sup>100</sup> “General de Gaulle’s Defence,” *The Times*, 4 June 1945, 5. “Americans Condemn French Action in Levant: Doubts about British Impartiality,” *The Guardian*, 2 June 1945, 6.

<sup>101</sup> Telegramme, Massigli à Bidault, 11 June 1945, 380QONT/278, MAE.

<sup>102</sup> C.M. 3(45) Agenda, 31 May 1945, CAB 195/3/39, TNA.

<sup>103</sup> *Hansard* HC Deb vol. 411 col. 40 (29 May 1945)

<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1945/may/29/syria-and-lebanon-situation>.

could cause “adverse French reaction as well as unfavourable comment in [the] State Department and American Press.”<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, the close of the European war and the approach of the general election in Britain led to a decline in interest as the public moved from a wartime to a reconstruction or post-war mentality. Clement Attlee’s victory over wartime leader Winston Churchill was a sign of this shift within the public sphere, even if the Middle East remained of primary importance to decision makers. Indeed, the newly elected Labour government continued to champion this region as vital to British policy. Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin advocated the need to “broaden the basis of British influence in the Middle East through economic and social policy.”<sup>105</sup>

Statements like these reflected a level of continuity in official thought, which persisted in seeing empire as a source of power and prestige. However, first France in 1946 and, shortly after, Britain in 1948 would be unceremoniously ejected from their Middle Eastern mandate projects. The Syrian crisis in May 1945 exposed a period of great change and heightened uncertainty at the end of a global conflict. In both France and Britain, official desires to preserve influence in overseas territories clashed, not just with nationalist sentiments but also with metropolitan demands for reconstruction at home. For Britain, preserving influence in the Middle East meant presenting a carefully constructed neutral front. Overt French violence put an end to this tactic and caused extensive damage to the Anglo-French relationship. De Gaulle’s provisional government, on the other hand, lacked the material resources necessary to take unilateral control of the Levant. More importantly, the displays of violence in Damascus effectively forfeited any remaining ethical and moral capital to the nationalists. De Gaulle found himself under the intense pressure of American and Soviet anti-imperialist rhetoric, international critique emanating from the San Francisco Conference, and British military superiority. Even the provisional government avoided defending Roget’s actions. There was little option left except to withdraw.

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<sup>104</sup> Sir Orme Sargent to Foreign Secretary, 2 July 1945, PREM 8/108, TNA.

<sup>105</sup> Ritchie Ovendale, *Britain, the United States and the Transfer of Power in the Middle East, 1945-1962* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996), 5.

## Conclusion

The negotiations that followed, leading to the joint Anglo-French evacuation of the Levant in the spring of 1946 lie beyond the scope of this chapter. However, it is worth adding that Anglo-French tensions in the Levant were hardly over. In January 1946, French General Raoul Monclar was appointed as the new commander of the French forces in the Levant, a development that was deplored by the Syrian population. British officials also expressed dislike of Monclar, not least because of his “high handed and tactless actions” and reputation as a “hot headed member of [the] French “colonial” clique.” Among other things, Monclar had filled his back garden in Beirut with explosive booby traps, which were triggered late one evening, shattering several windows in the British Consulate General next door.<sup>106</sup> On 10 January 1946, J Thyme Henderson, a Foreign Office specialist on the Far East, commented on French attitudes towards the Levant “The French seem to be behaving stupidly, however, we needn’t save the French from themselves.”<sup>107</sup>

The process of negotiating withdrawal was a tortured one, and the last British and French forces did not leave the Levant until August 1946. However, in early 1946, the British were so desperate to extricate themselves from the imbroglio that they were contemplating a unilateral exit.<sup>108</sup> One of the initial reasons for this course of action was the hope that it might shore up local opinion towards the British. There were signs throughout the Levant that popular sentiment was becoming increasingly hostile to the Anglo-French presence. Shone provided a constant stream of reports, making suggestions for British lines of publicity and providing analyses of Syrian and Lebanese public opinion.<sup>109</sup> After receiving these reports, a Cabinet distribution commented upon the dangers of unilateral withdrawal. This report argued that if the British were to leave without forcing a simultaneous exit, “Their [Levant states] oriental minds will not see the logic of our decision; and if we are to minimise odium and lose as little influence as possible, notification of our decision would best be

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<sup>106</sup> Shone to Foreign Office, 5 January 1946, FO 371/52842, TNA.

<sup>107</sup> J. Thyme Henderson, Comment on 3 January 1946 telegram from Shone, 10 January 1946, FO 371/52842, TNA.

<sup>108</sup> Directive from Foreign Office to H.M. Minister, Beirut, 20 February 1946, FO 371/52844, TNA. Halifax to Foreign Office, 5 March 1946, FO 371/52845, TNA.

<sup>109</sup> Of particular interest are Foreign Office documents FO 371/52847 and FO 371/52845.

made when it could be accompanied by maximum world publicity for our reasons for it.”

In the last two years of the war, British Middle East policy was most strongly influenced from two quarters: the United States and the Middle East itself. Britain was committed to retaining its influence in this oil-rich region and needed both American support and the willingness of regional leaders to accomplish this goal. In this context, rhetoric allowed Britain to fashion itself as a proponent of liberal-minded imperial reform, a nominal supporter of Syrian and Lebanese independence *and* a proponent of mutually agreed Franco-Levantine treaties. However, it soon became clear that French demands were irreconcilable with the kind of unfettered independence Syrian and Lebanese nationalist movements had in mind. The violence of the French bombardment in Damascus forced Britain to act, both to put an end to the destruction and loss of life and shore up its own prestige. At the same time, by encouraging Syrian and Lebanese leaders to de-escalate the situation by getting international opinion onto their side, Paget was signalling his desire to distance Britain as much as possible from the crisis.

The French provisional government, and more importantly, the series of highhanded colonial administrators who officiated over the close of the mandates, displayed a fundamental unwillingness to relinquish influence over the Levant. De Gaulle himself was determined to see France regain her position as a global power. In this case, having power meant not simply having an empire but controlling how and the extent to which it was reformed. Negotiating treaties that would perpetuate French influence in the Levant was the first test of French power. It failed on a spectacular level. Facing the heavy task of reconstructing metropolitan France both structurally and socially, there was little *actionable* support for imperial projects at home. Nor did the assumption that France would retain her empire translate into a coherent plan for colonial reform.

## Chapter 10: Conclusion

Sitting down to summarise over three years of reading, archival research and historical analysis is not, as it turns out, an easy task. Staring at the screen of my pitifully overworked laptop, dozens of scholarly arguments and possible lines of discussion competed to be heard. A few days into what felt like a historical black hole, a non academic friend asked me a deceptively simple question: “and the conclusion is...?” His query made me think about my research in a different light. Instead of trying to cobble together all of the observations that have been made throughout this study about power, sovereignty or ethics, I made myself think about the one factor that united all of those themes. How could I describe my work in just a few words? In the end, I settled upon two words: rhetoric matters. Yes, at the heart of all of the crisis points or case studies that have been picked apart over the last few hundred pages, there is one central idea. That idea is that rhetoric is an essential, indeed an organic component within government policy making establishments. Rhetoric is the thread that links the policy that was being made behind the closed doors of the War Cabinet with how it was later being perceived, discussed, or criticised within different sectors of the public, both in the metropole and further afield.

Rhetoric, from this perspective, becomes a tool not of simple policy explanation, but of political persuasion. The arguments that are being constructed and published via the highest levels of government policy making establishments are written with the intention of convincing their readership to think about and discuss an issue in a particular way. What remains concerning is that the means for doing this may be to appeal to human reason, but may just as easily rely on the use of highly emotional and even factually inaccurate arguments. By acknowledging that the statesmen who have appeared throughout this study were strategically using rhetoric in order to influence how an operation or an initiative was judged by a particular group or groups leads to a second assertion. Namely, public opinion, or what decision makers and leaders *believe* to be public opinion can have a tangible impact on a final policy. Likewise, the mass media can echo or challenge the arguments made through official government statements. As we have seen, throughout the Second World War, the governments in both France and Britain alongside Charles de Gaulle’s

Free French movement looked to the press as a reliable measurement of public opinion.

So, rhetoric as a persuasive and interpretive tool provides a link between the government and wider popular opinion. The next question is: what insights can rhetoric provide into the policy making process and more specially into the policies that were being made between 1940-1945? In other words what can we learn from the content of official statements and mass media responses? The remainder of this discussion will expand upon three closely connected themes that have emerged throughout this thesis. First, on a broader level policy making has a strong moral and ethical dimension. This is particularly evident in decisions that lead to or may lead to displays of violence. Second, policy is not always purely strategic. It is also highly symbolic. In the context of the Second World War, British policy placed a great deal of emphasis on pursuing operations that would heighten their own prestige. On the other hand, Vichy's responses to British incursions into French colonial territory were intent on maintaining the illusion that unoccupied France constituted a legitimate sovereign territory. The empire and the fleet were two symbols of this claim. Last, there is sometimes a gap between rhetoric and policy or, more specifically, the underlying intentions of policy. This theme was particularly evident at the close of the war, when the French Provisional Government and Britain clashed over the post-war political organisation of the Middle East.

### **The Moral Dimension of Decision Making**

Just war theorist Michael Walzer summarised the problem of morality and conflict succinctly: "Realism is the issue. The defenders of *silent leges* claim to have discovered an awful truth: what we conventionally call inhumanity is simply humanity under pressure."<sup>1</sup> However, what this thesis has shown is that governmental policy making, whether during war or peace balances somewhere between moral imperatives and self interest. The difficulty lies in making sense of the complex relationship between statesmen on one hand and the often shifting range of factors that contribute to the policy making process on the other. Put another way, what considerations are shaping how statesmen respond to different national and international events and how might their

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 4.

worldviews change over time? This study has demonstrated that policy making is above all a highly complex process. It absolutely incorporates a certain amount of self interest. However, it is also limited by contemporary cultural norms, accepted ethical and moral behaviour, and estimations of public opinion. Cathal Nolan has described international ethics as “dirty, grey, uncertain choices.”<sup>2</sup> He is right in arguing that politics and policy making cannot truly be understood without also grasping the historical context in which individual choices were being made. Likewise, this analysis, which has focused upon points of high tension in the Anglo-French relationship, examines how ethical considerations played a part in or were at least recognised in the rhetoric of wartime policy.

Beginning with the British, the decision to continue fighting against the Axis powers after the French defeat in June 1940 was almost always portrayed as a moral decision. Churchill’s addresses similarly promised that victory was guaranteed because Britain was on the “right” side of the battle. One of his best-remembered speeches, given in the House of Commons on 4 June 1940 did this by contrasting Britain’s glorious and fundamentally honourable past to Hitler’s “sinister” and “perverted” ideology.<sup>3</sup> Still, regardless of the seemingly prophetic qualities of Churchill’s speeches, victory over the Axis was never guaranteed as a matter of moral principle. It was in large part the British victory in 1945 that gave Churchill’s earlier addresses such staying power. Yes, it is undoubtedly fair to say that Hitler and his Nazi party did breach essential and fundamental laws of humanity and human rights in ways that were not comparable to Allied policies. However, this does not mean that no great insights can be achieved from studying how moral questions were dealt with on all sides of the conflict.<sup>4</sup> As we have seen, British operational policies carried out against the imperial possessions of metropolitan France were, particularly in

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<sup>2</sup> Cathal J Nolan, “Introduction,” in *Ethics and Statecraft: The Moral Dimension of International Affairs*, ed. Cathal J. Nolan (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Burleigh, *Moral Combat: A History of World War II* (London: Harper Press, 2010), 170.

<sup>4</sup> AC Grayling addresses this question in relation to the questionably effectiveness and ethicality of Allied bombing during the Second World War. AC Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities: Is the Targeting of Civilians in War Ever Justified?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007). Michael Burleigh’s *Moral Combat* has also tackled the question of moral norms during wartime. His book is particularly helpful in its observations on moral dilemmas that the Allies faced in areas such as clandestine warfare and perceptions of terrorism. See esp. chapter 11.

1940, influenced by accepted moral codes. This was strongly evident in the British operations against the French fleet at Mers el-Kébir, operation Catapult. In this operation, policy makers were constrained by the prospect of civilian casualties. They ruled out any violent operations at Algiers and the commercial port of Oran because bombarding these ports would lead to extensive civilian deaths. At Alexandria, where the British did carry out operations to neutralise French ships under the command of Admiral Godfroy, both civilian casualties and fear of damaging the port installations themselves influenced the Chief of Staff's decision to offer Godfroy a more lenient ultimatum. However, when Britain and its allies did use force against metropolitan France and its empire, one of the most frequently used themes to justify this decision was the concept of inevitability. This kind of discourse, what Walzer would describe as "references to necessity and duress," demonstrates how on a basic level decision makers remained cognizant of how moral norms placed limitations on the acceptability of violence, even during war.<sup>5</sup> British rhetoric developed a two-part argument based on claims that operations such as those at Mers el-Kébir were necessary. First, destroying the fleet was indispensable in order to maintain the British war effort and protect the metropole. Second, German perfidy (they will eventually use the fleet against Britain) and French impotence (they will be unable to resist German pressure) made British actions inevitable.

Despite the undeniable violence of the final bombardments at Mers el-Kébir, British actions received widespread support from within the metropole and from abroad. The justifications that were written largely within the Admiralty successfully argued that although tragic, the bombardments were the inevitable result of the Franco-German armistice and a necessary step towards ultimate victory. The entire process of Catapult, from the initial discussions within the War Cabinet to the near unanimous (apart from metropolitan France obviously) reception amongst much of the public revolves around one key idea. Namely, moral codes, while not disappearing, do alter between war and peace. This is a point that has been written about in more depth in the field of International Relations (IR) and its subfield Foreign Policy. Stephen Garrett, for example, has challenged the classical argument that the inherent brutality of war allows leaders to more easily perpetrate and justify what would otherwise be considered heinous acts. Under the IR concept of "dirty hands" moreover,

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<sup>5</sup> Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 4.



officials are seemingly justified in taking actions for the benefit of the broader society that would be considered irreprehensible were they being carried out by a private individual in a peacetime context.<sup>6</sup> While Garrett mobilised theories of wartime morality to judge historical decisions, my own research, by contrast, has shown how conceptions of morality impacted the way in which wartime policy was formulated and discussed. It has established a better understanding of what factors, including moral ones, entered the policy making process. In doing so it has shown how potentially divisive or morally ambiguous policies were explained using language that described a unique system of wartime ethics. It has shown that policy makers certainly were more willing to embark on operations that would have been widely criticised outside of a wartime context without immediately abandoning the understanding that civilians were inherently innocent and thus not viable targets. Equally importantly, this view was made possible in part by the knowledge that the British and American publics would support operations that appeared to contribute towards Allied victory. This became highly apparent, particularly in public responses to what were seen as military failures.

The operational failures of joint Anglo-Gaullist forces, first at Dakar in September 1940 and again in the Levant in 1941 were the subject of a great deal of criticism within Britain. After withdrawing without capturing the strategic port of Dakar, Senegal, de Gaulle tried to save face by claiming that his decision was taken to avoid bloodshed and a battle between Frenchmen. However, both the British public and the mass media more broadly unreservedly criticised the withdrawal. It was, these groups claimed, contrary to the pursuit of victory. De Gaulle was arguing that withdrawal was justified because it was ethical. However, what the Dakar chapter made clear was that his decision was being debated outside of peacetime morality. The conflict called for, even demanded decisive and unflinching action. Casualties were expected and accepted and there was sometimes little inclination amongst the British public to consider the Vichy government and its armed defenders as anything but an enemy nation. Indeed, Home Intelligence Reports have preserved calls from the British public at the same time as the Torch operations

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen A. Garrett, "Political Leadership and "Dirty Hands": Winston Churchill and the City Bombing of Germany," in *Ethics and Statecraft: The Moral Dimension of International Affairs*, ed. Cathal J. Nolan (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004): 59-74.

that were demanding bombing raids on German and Italian cities as reprisals for the destruction of British cities.

During the Anglo-Gaullist invasion and capture of the two Levant states in June-July 1941, discontent over the perceived softness of Allied forces again led to public criticism. Churchill himself addressed public discontent over the slow progress towards capturing Syria and Lebanon. The rumours identified through Home Intelligence Reports urged the swift completion of operation Exporter. They suggested that the on going struggle was a result of Imperial and Free French forces showing underserved sympathy towards Vichy defenders. The immense value placed on tangible victory in these examples can be examined through S.I. Benn's concept of "conscientious wickedness." He describes this idea as the pursuit of a single minded objective, which is generally agreed to be good or ethical. However, this objective is pursued without regard for evil or immoral acts perpetrated along the way.<sup>7</sup> Scholars like Stephen Garrett have used this concept to analyse the actions of Allied leaders in the Second World War, most particularly in the case of the area bombing of Germany in the last half of the war. Taking a more expansive approach towards policy making, it becomes clear that policy makers were not alone in distinguishing between war and peace time morality. There was a great deal of support amongst the British public for policies that appeared to align with the ultimate goal of victory. There was a significantly lower degree of sympathy for what were considered enemy casualties, even in some cases civilian casualties in an enemy nation. This is an interesting point, which could be expanded upon further by future research. Namely, casting retrospective blame on statesmen for pursuing morally questionable policies during a time of war obscures the links between these leaders and the broader interested public. If there is a shift in what is understood as morally defensible behaviour, surely this is true across a broad spectrum of the population, not just amongst the political elite.

Connotations of acceptable moral behaviour change during a conflict. But, these rules extend in theory only to those nations who are active participants within the conflict. After concluding the Franco-German and Franco-Italian armistices, unoccupied Southern France under Pétain's Vichy government became, in name, a neutral state. However, the neutrality of Vichy

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 71.

was hotly contested throughout the conflict.<sup>8</sup> On one side, Britain claimed imperial incursions against Vichy colonial territory were justified because of a combination of German infiltration and Vichy's policies of collaboration. On the other hand, Vichy argued that these operations were at heart illegal and immoral acts of territorial aggression against a sovereign and neutral territory. Vichy's arguments were particularly evident throughout the rhetoric of public speeches, statements and the content of press reports. After each crisis point, we saw how Vichy attacked the brutality of British aggression against sovereign territory. Not only were British actions unwarranted, Vichy argued, they subverted the traditional democratic process of negotiation by perpetrating a policy of deadly force against an innocent and unprepared former ally. To establish credibility for such criticisms, however, Pétain's government had to convince other nations that unoccupied France was indeed a non belligerent. This was, as we saw in the Mers el-Kébir chapters, difficult from the beginning. In late June 1940 both Pétain and Darlan argued that the fleet was safe, and that their honour bound them not to act contrary to the armistice terms. However, a week later the majority of neutral countries, including the United States, announced that they believed that British actions were justified in light of the credible threat of a German takeover of the French fleet. Moreover, as the war continued, French concessions towards Germany further eroded its proposed neutrality. This was most apparent in the Anglo-Free French operations to capture Syria and Lebanon. Minister for Foreign Affairs Admiral Darlan acquiesced to German demands for the use of Syrian Aerodromes in Spring 1941 to support the anti-British uprising in Iraq. After the Torch invasions in December 1942, Vichy would again grant German access to rebuff incursions in Tunisia. The total occupation of France in late 1942 certainly put an end to any claims of metropolitan French sovereignty. However, what remains important is that prior to this Vichy used rhetoric as a way to establish the credibility of the French nation. More importantly, Vichy was largely unsuccessful in securing outside criticism for British actions. Even the United States, which recognised Pétain's government largely failed to echo French criticisms against British policy towards France and its empire.

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<sup>8</sup> For a more in-depth theoretical discussion about the rights and responsibilities of a neutral state see: Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, Chapter 15.

### **Guarding Prestige: The Symbolic Value of Wartime Policy**

Wartime policy also incorporated a second, intangible factor: national prestige. In mid 1940 Britain, having recently lost its French ally had few offensive military options available to it. Certainly, launching a full scale attack against Germany was out of the question. Taking firm action against the French fleet, however, was highly achievable. Moreover, as was made clear in War Cabinet meetings, both the British population and American officials, including President Roosevelt himself, had expressed the desire for decisive action to neutralise the fleet. Official statements and press responses portrayed the events at Mers el-Kébir as proof of British resolve. The eventual victory that would follow from making difficult but unwavering decisions such as this one was also portrayed using highly emotive and historic rhetoric. These descriptions included images of Churchill delivering his rousing Commons address and reassuring highlights in the press of past British victories. Other decisions, such as the refusal to offer demilitarisation to Admiral Gensoul for fear of appearing weak also betrayed the symbolic value of the Catapult operations. In all of the case studies that this thesis has examined, the importance of prestige was evident in British, Free French and Vichy actions and, crucially, rhetoric. In the case of Mers el-Kébir British policy towards the French fleet was not just a response to a strategic threat. It symbolised British commitment to the war effort. This had the effect of assuring American official opinion and boosting British morale within the metropole.

Likewise, after failures such as those at Dakar only three months later, we saw how British policy makers learned from and emphasised that operational failure would damage their prestige. While planning the invasions of the Levant states, avoiding political embarrassment like that at Dakar was one of the considerations that entered into the decision making process. Similarly, in the first major American-led offensive action in North Africa in 1942, it was clear that Roosevelt hoped to avoid symbolic resistance from Vichy forces by stressing the American character of the operations. Despite the large numbers of British forces participating in the Torch landings, this fact was absent from the initial public statements. Rhetoric then, was used in a symbolic way to illustrate British strength and commitment to the war effort. Silence, or the deliberate choice to suppress certain information from the public, such as the British role in the North Africa invasions, was likewise a strategic use of rhetoric. In the British

metropole, the official decision in the autumn of 1940 not to publish statistics of air raid deaths was a way to avoid compromising happier imagery of victory though hard work and commitment to the war effort.

This same tactic, emphasising the French character of joint Anglo-Free French operations in Dakar and the Levant was used by the British in the hopes of lessening resistance from Vichy forces. However, the majority of troops and the strategic plans for these operations were in fact British. Official communiqués greatly emphasising the inherent “Frenchness” of each operation showed how important the concept of image was. De Gaulle’s Free French movement was portrayed as the true representative of the French nation. British rhetoric did this not only through direct support of Gaullist resistance, but also by deliberately separating the French population from the “men of Vichy.” Despite its initial unpopularity, the Free French movement was nevertheless symbolically important because it allowed Britain to argue that operations against French colonial territory were being carried out by French forces for the benefit of the French nation. Moreover, imperial holdings were vital for both Vichy and Free France. Both sides held up empire as a symbol of their respective representative legitimacy.

In each crisis point, British and Free French forces challenged Vichy’s right to freely govern the empire and fleet. In responding to these challenges, the metropolitan French government chose to emphasise Britain’s role. By casting blame exclusively on British territorial aggression and imperial rivalry, Vichy effectively suppressed any mention of the Free French movement and its position as a rival French voice. In other words, official responses interpreted imperial incursions as just that – simple cases of imperial land grabbing. De Gaulle, when mentioned, was portrayed as a unique traitor and British agent while the Free French movement was noticeably absent from either official or press publications. We saw how the empire was just as important to de Gaulle and what became the provisional French government in 1944. Having an empire was an important sign of legitimacy but also power and prestige on a global level. In both cases, de Gaulle and the Vichy government believed that being able to demonstrate control over colonial territories would help them attain global status. By May 1945 the French empire became of even greater importance, as both France and Britain sought to find a way to maintain ties with strategically important territories. At the same time, the reality of

reconstruction at home, increasing demands from nationalist movements and a heavy reliance on loans from the anti-imperialist United States made demonstrations of imperial reform essential.

### **Minding the Rhetorical Gap**

This thesis has focussed upon showing how closed-door policy making can be connected to the public sphere via rhetoric. Particularly towards the end of the war, we began to see that sometimes the way in which a policy was presented or discussed publically did not always match its underlying strategic goals. This was especially apparent in the case of the Levant states. Here, and in the broader Middle East, both France and Britain hoped to preserve varying levels of strategic, economic and cultural influence by concluding preferential treaties with their colonies and mandated territories. Their abilities to do this depended upon being able to exert more power and influence than the local nationalist groups that were beginning to demand unqualified independence. Examining Anglo-French policies towards the Levant and Middle East between 1941-1945 revealed the limitations that both states faced in achieving this goal.

In the first instance, joint Anglo-Free French promises in 1941 assured the Levant states that they would be granted independence. The spectre of independence, however, caused a great deal of strain in both Anglo-French and Franco-Levantine relations. Each side tended to interpret the idea of independence through a largely self-interested framework. Here, the British and Middle East Command based in Cairo did their best to rise above the fray and present themselves as a neutral middleman. However, this position led to a significant difficulty. Knowing that the prospect for unrest was extremely high in British Palestine, it was vital that Britain be able to *retain* a credible neutrality throughout Franco-Levantine negotiations. The only way that this was possible was if France, Syria and Lebanon were able to come to a mutual agreement on France's future position in those territories without significant British intervention. This was not to be. What these three chapters on the Levant showed, however, was that the success of British policy was inextricably linked to Britain's public image in the Middle East. The benign image presented through numerous public statements that reiterated the independence guarantees was not consistent with long term strategy. British policies – when it

came to their own territories – bore a striking resemblance to the Franco-Levantine treaty demands.

The violent repression of nationalist sentiment first in Lebanon in 1943 and later in Damascus in 1945 ultimately discredited French demands and forced Britain to exercise its superior military and political power. The crisis in the Levant was heightened by the fact that the Free French and later the provisional government never had the material resources to challenge British policy in the Middle East. Indeed, following the French capitulation and de Gaulle's arrival in London, it soon became clear that the lack of recruits to the Free French movement meant it had more moral than actual power. Thus, Free French policies and ostensible Anglo-Free French operations could always be traced back to British support. Gaullist policy in this sense was a reflection of British policy resulting from its almost complete financial and material reliance upon its hosts. De Gaulle's response to British actions at Mers el –Kébir was typical of this relationship. De Gaulle offered his public support of the bombardments notwithstanding his private fury. Between 1940-1944, de Gaulle had little choice but to publically align British and Free French policy. Opting to challenge Britain, as he did in September 1941, risked exposing the overwhelming British power that was the underlying framework of the Free French movement.

Becoming the head of the provisional government in 1944 may have given de Gaulle official recognition and legitimacy as the head of the liberated French state. However, the economic and financial reality in France was dire. De Gaulle's attempts to revitalise French prestige through a reformed empire were faced by challenges from at home and abroad. These challenges reflected the disparity between French rhetoric and the actual reality of French material resources. In the Levant, French claims based on historic cultural influence met a determined nationalist movement. Two realities severely limited de Gaulle's and a series of determined colonial administrator's efforts to successfully press their demands. First, the continuing superiority of British military strength in the Middle East and the Levant more specifically meant that that de Gaulle's provisional government could hardly create unilateral policies without the possibility of British interference. Second, American and Soviet anti imperial policies (whether rhetorical or actual) as well as fear of tarnishing its own image in the Arab world gave Britain strong reasons to respond to French violence.

While American and Soviet anti imperialism helped to internationalise discussions surrounding the future of empires, forums such as the San Francisco conference and later the United Nations would serve as platforms upon which previously unrepresented states could publicise their grievances.

### **Conclusion and Future Research**

Ultimately, why is this rhetorical link, between policy makers and the public sphere so important? In short, public statements and explanations for both foreign and domestic policy can give us better insights into how decision makers view and attempt to influence what they believe is public opinion. Of crucial importance, the three themes discussed above do not function independently of one another. Rather, together they illustrate how intangible considerations such as morality and prestige were fundamental considerations throughout Anglo-French wartime policy. Linked to this, we saw how rhetoric can be used to camouflage other, strategic interests or a lack of material power. The grammatical construction and word choice of press releases and speeches are vital clues as to the values, ideas and opinions that make up official arguments and try to shape a particular public response. The repeated use of emotive historic imagery can give researchers clues into how historical events are preserved in cultural memory.

Politics and policy making is not a strict exercise in top down government. Rhetoric allows us to see how different policies, whether in war or peace are formulated, disseminated, discussed, debated, judged and remembered. As such, rhetoric is a powerful tool of persuasion and historical analysis. Crucially, it can be used to further interdisciplinary studies linking past and present perspectives, for example, by analysing the use of historic rhetoric in contemporary political addresses and media sources. Most recently, we saw this in the British European Union referendum, as politicians mobilised emotional arguments from the Second World War to convince the British public how to vote. Not only, then, can the methodology used in this thesis be applied to additional historical case studies, it can also be used to encourage a more critical look at the content of today's political and media publications. In the final analysis, rhetoric opens up greater understanding into how we try to or are persuaded to make sense of the world around us. It opens the way into broader



debates such as what constitutes moral behaviour in war and peace and how these discussions are carried out between policy makers and their publics.

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